The Many Deaths of LAILA STARR™

RAM V

FILIPE ANDRADE

The Many Deaths of LAILA STARR™

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The Many Deaths of LAILA STARR™

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FOREWORD

Big cities in India are so familiarly chaotic. There's always something happening at any given time of the day or the night, and there are all different sorts of people you'll meet. Well, there are just SO MANY people, and the streets and buildings are so crowded, that it's impossible to go by in one of these places without meeting someone interesting. I just went to India once, and the big city was New Delhi, and not Mumbai, but the bubbling chaos was there, and it was just as creatively intoxicating and inspiring as my hometown of São Paulo. Suddenly you start to make connections in your mind about the richness of color all around and how the darker warmer color of people's skins is the same as the color of the wall of their temples, and that the color of their eyes are the exotic colors of the many precious gems you'll find in the central market. The great diversity of big cities is a reflection of how colorful and diverse the country is. The contrast of classes, with the super-rich and the super-poor, is also very familiar, and many stories I read from India could take place in Brazil, especially because despite all of the differences and the problems and the struggles, people are always willing to celebrate life in a daily basis, with their families, their friends, their cultural events or spiritual ceremonies. Sometimes it surprises me how people can find happiness and joy in such difficult circumstances, surrounded by so much tragedy. It almost feels like magic.

This book feels like that. Like magic.

In magical stories like this, it's all about dazzling the readers so they lower their guard down. Basic magic rule, distract the audience so they're not looking where you don't want them to. I was dazzled with Filipe's fluid and loose artwork, and before I knew it, I dove into that world, forgot I was reading a comic book and just focused on the characters I was getting so fond of and that expressive world they inhabit. Then, when my guard was down, that's when the story hit me without me realizing. That's when I bumped into the heart of the story just like you'd bump into a friend at a party, and since it was a special party and you'll always remember that party, you now have this unforgettable connection with that friend. The heart of this story bumps into you and suddenly it's through the eyes of these characters, and through their lives, that you'll find yourself seeing your own life, your own story. It's like looking into the eyes of your friend, back at that party, and you see yourself reflected in those eyes, and you might be happy or sad or disillusioned or excited, but no matter how you were feeling, you remember being truly alive.

Alive and surrounded by friends.

I distinctively remember feeling alive at a party once, surrounded by friends. I was in San Diego, during Comic-Con, and I had just won an award for a book I did called *Daytripper*, which was a special book for me, and so that was a special award. I was so happy for the award, and was especially happy because I had so many friends there with me to celebrate, to be happy for me, to be happy with me. And, among that little bubble of happiness in a late night hopping from hotel bar to hotel bar around the Gaslamp district that my friends maintained, there was Filipe, a Portuguese among the Brazilians, separated by an ocean but joined by a common mother language, celebrating with us and becoming part of that night, and part of that memory I hold very close to my heart.

It's funny how life connects people. It almost feels like magic.

Inside the pages of this book, life certainly feels like magic, in the best possible way, and you feel alive while reading it.

Alive and surrounded by friends.

Fábio Moon
written in a garden in São Paulo,
surrounded by bunnies, on October 3rd, 2021

CHAPTER ONE

ONCE UPON A FALLING STARR

IT BEGAN ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON AS A LATE DECEMBER SUN WAS JUST DIPPING BELOW THE MUMBAI SKYLINE.

MRS. SHAH WAS SCREAMING AT MR. SHAH OVER THE BLARING TRAFFIC AT THE B.K.C. OVERPASS AS HER DRIVER WEAVED THROUGH THE IMPOSSIBLE SPACES WITHIN.

HONK HONK

PIP PIP PIP

BLAARP

BEEP

EACH TIME THEY YELLED AT HIM FOR HIS DANGEROUS DRIVING...

...HE POINTED TO A VOLATILE MRS. SHAH IN THE BACK, AND SAID...

FWEEEEEEEEEEET

...“THE BABY IS COMING.”

MEANWHILE ON THE SIXTH FLOOR OF THE ARIA TOWERS IN PAREL, THE T.I. MEDIA STUDIES CLASS OF 2019 WAS HAVING A FINAL YEAR PARTY.

A LAST HURRAH BEFORE THEY EACH WENT THEIR OWN WAYS.

IT WAS, FOR ALL OF THEM, A MOMENT OF PRECARIOUS BALANCE BEFORE LIFE PLUMMETED INTO THE UNKNOWN.

FOR THE PAST HOUR DHIRAJ HAD BEEN TALKING TO THE GIRL AT THE WINDOW ABOUT THE PATRIARCHAL POWER EQUATIONS...

...WITHIN THE EXPECTATION THAT HE HAD TO BE THE ONE TO ASK HER OUT.

BUT SHE HADN'T HEARD HIM AT ALL.

BENEATH THE GENTLE CURLS OF RAVEN HAIR, HER EYES WERE CAUGHT ON DISTANT CITY LIGHTS AND HER THOUGHTS, LIKE THE CIGARETTE SMOKE, WERE DRIFTING.

AND THAT VERY EVENING IN A HIGH PLACE, FAR BEYOND MORTAL CLOUDS...

...DEATH WAS TAKING AN ELEVATOR TO THE TOP OF THE SILVERED TOWER.

HOLD THE DOOR!

BEING CALLED TO THE TOP FLOOR WAS A RARE THING, EVEN FOR HER. AND IT HAD MADE HER MORE THAN A LITTLE NERVOUS.

SORRY! SORRY!

IN ALL HER TIME SHE HAD NEVER KNOWN THE PURVEYOR OF ALL GOODNESS TO EVER BE THE BEARER OF GOOD NEWS.

DING!

AHH, DEATH!

THIS WAY PLEASE.

SIR?

HRRHMMM... SIR?

YES, YES...WHAT IS IT, AGNI?

UMM... IT'S DEATH, SIR.

SHE'S HERE FOR YOUR MORNING MEETING?

AHH, DEATH! YES, YES, OF COURSE!

COME, COME. HAVE A SEAT.

THAT'LL BE ALL, AGNI. THANK YOU.

VERY GOOD, SIR.

SO, DEATH...TELL ME, HOW'RE THINGS?

YES, Y'KNOW...

THINGS?

...WORK, LIFE, FRIENDSHIPS... HOBBIES?

THEY'RE...

...W-WHAT AM I DOING HERE, SIR?

TAP TAP TAP

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WITH US, DEATH?

FEELS LIKE AN ETERNITY, DOESN'T IT?

I HAVE ACTUALLY BEEN HERE FOR AN ETERNITY.

HMMM? OH, YES...YES, I SUPPOSE THAT'S TRUE.

WHAT A PITY, THEN...

A PITY, SIR?

"YES, DEATH. I'M AFRAID WE'RE LETTING YOU GO."

WHAT?!

N-NOW, NOW...IT'S NOT PERSONAL! W-WE'RE RESTRUCTURING THE WHOLE DEPARTMENT.

IT'S ALL HERE, YOU SEE? IN THIS FILE.

I DON'T CARE WHAT'S IN THE FILE. I'M ***DEATH!*** BIG FEARSOME TONGUE. HAUNTING EYES, SIX ARMS.

YOU CAN'T JUST ***FIRE*** ME! I'M AN ABSOLUTE CONSEQUENCE. IT'S IN THE JOB DESCRIPTION.

I BET ***TAXES*** STILL HAS HER CORNER OFFICE, DOESN'T SHE?

"B-BUT YOU SEE, RIGHT HERE ON PAGE 64, IT SAYS--'ON THE TWELFTH DAY OF THE TWELFTH MONTH, SHALL HE BE BORN UNTO MAN, THE CHILD WHO SHALL BRING ETERNAL LIFE.'"

SO YOU SEE, IT'S ALL JUST PRUDENT PLANNING. THERE JUST WON'T BE AS MUCH...DEATH, AND SO--

SEND DOWN A PLAGUE! STRIKE THE CHILD WITH LIGHTNING. SET SOME GREAT CURSE UPON HIM! I DON'T CARE.

N-NOW, NOW, DEATH. YOU KNOW HOW CORPORATE FEELS ABOUT THAT KIND OF STUFF!

BUT THIS IS ALL I KNOW...THIS IS ALL I'VE EVER DONE. I HAVE NOTHING ELSE!

WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?

AT TIMES, HER FURY THUNDERED THROUGH THE IVORY TOWER. SHE THREATENED TO END ALL THINGS, BEFORE SLUMPING INTO HER CHAIR IN A DEEP MELANCHOLY.

SHE PLEADED, THEN SHE FELL QUIET. SHE CONSIDERED BEGGING, BUT STOPPED SHORT.

SHE NODDED AS THE THREE-HEADED GOD WENT THROUGH A BROCHURE WITH HER. A HUMAN BODY WAS TO BE GIVEN, TO EXPERIENCE THE PLEASURES OF A MORTAL LIFE TO CALL HER OWN.

A MORTAL WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES!

-A HELPFUL GUIDE FOR AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE AFTER GODHOOD-

IT WAS AROUND THAT TIME THAT THE GIRL FROM THE WINDOW AT THE PARTY WAS FALLING THROUGH THE AIR--TWO FLOORS DOWN AND FAST APPROACHING THE GROUND.

LATER, THE PARTY-GOERS WOULD SAY SHE SLIPPED FROM HER PERCH AND FELL. YET OTHERS WOULD SWEAR THAT THEY SAW HER JUMP.

JUST AS SHE HIT THE GROUND, MRS. SHAH WAS IN THE AMRAVATI HOSPITAL SQUEEZING HER HUSBAND'S HAND WITH SUCH STRENGTH THAT HE WAS SCREAMING LOUDER THAN HER.

AS THE MIDWIFE URGED HER INTO ONE LAST PUSH, A NEW LIFE CAME INTO BEING.

A BEAUTIFUL THING THAT WOULD GO ON TO BE THE CAUSE OF MUCH CONSTERNATION IN HIS MANY YEARS TO COME.

UP

DOWN

=SNRRRFFF SNIFFLE=

AGNI?

NO.

NO? I HAVEN'T EVEN ASKED...

I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE THINKING AND THE ANSWER IS NO.

WHY NOT?

BECAUSE YOU'LL DO SOMETHING TERRIBLE AND I'LL HAVE TO ANSWER FOR IT.

OH, BOO HOO. I'M GOING TO GO DOWN THERE AND BE A MORTAL. I'M GOING TO GROW OLD AND HAVE ACHES AND PAINS.

I'M GOING TO TRUST PEOPLE I SHOULDN'T TRUST. I'M GOING TO LET DOWN PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE IN ME. I'M GOING TO HAVE MY HEART BROKEN.

THEN I'LL GET SOME KIND OF TERRIBLE AILMENT IN MY OLD AGE AND THEN I WILL DIE. OR WORSE...THAT LITTLE PRICK WILL HAVE INVENTED ETERNAL LIFE AND I'LL JUST HAVE TO LIVE THAT WAY. ALL BROKEN AND ILL AND SMELLY AND...AND...

=SIGH= OH, FIIIINE...FINE, WHAT DO YOU WANT?

WELL, YOU SEE, WHEN HE SHOWED ME THE FILE. THE LOCATION OF THE CHILD WAS ON THE PAPER.

OKAY?

WHEN YOU SEND ME DOWN AND GIVE ME A MORTAL BODY. CAN YOU PUT ME CLOSE TO THE CHILD?

WHY? WHAT'RE YOU GOING TO DO, DEATH?

THAT'S NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS, IS IT? I'LL BE A MORTAL THEN. MY ACTIONS. MY CONSEQUENCES.

FREE WILL. DAY OF JUDGMENT AND ALL THAT.

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW?

KRAKOM

AND SO, AS DEATH MADE HER FINAL BARGAIN ON HER WAY OUT OF THE IVORY TOWER...

...THE GIRL WHO FELL FROM THE PARTY WAS DRIVEN INTO THE HOSPITAL WITH SIRENS AND FLASHING LIGHTS, CLINGING YET TO THE EDGE OF HER LIFE.

AMBULANCE

THEY GAVE HER FENTANYL AND ETOMIDATE AND ROCURONIUM. THEY SEDATED HER, INTUBATED HER, AND DEFIBRILLATED HER.

THEY CHARGED THE PADDLES ALL THE WAY UP AND JOLTED HER FULL OF ELECTRICITY.

THEN AT EIGHT MINUTES PAST TEN, THEY DECLARED HER DEAD AND WALKED OUT OF THE ROOM.

OUTSIDE, HER FRIENDS HAD DISCOVERED THAT THE GIRL WAS AN ORPHAN WITH NO FAMILY, NO ONE TO CALL HER OWN.

IN DEATH AS IN LIFE, HER PATH FORGED BY HER OWN WILL, AIDED ON OCCASION BY THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS.

THEN AT THIRTY-TWO MINUTES PAST TEN, DEATH ARRIVED ON THIS MORTAL PLANE IN A BROKEN BODY REMADE JUST FOR HER.

GAAAAAAH!

=HAAAF=

=HUFF=

UNNNHH...

=HUFF=

OHHHHH, THAT FEELS AWFUL.

YEAH, WELL... YOU WERE DEAD FOR A GOOD TWENTY MINUTES OR SO.

WHO'RE YOU?

I... Y-YOU CAN SEE ME?

I-I'M A GHOST! YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO BE ABLE TO SEE ME!

A GHOST?

DEAD AND GONE BUT STILL KICKING AROUND. UNFULFILLED DESIRES AND ALL THAT.

MY NAME IS MUNMUN.

YOU HAVE UNFULFILLED DESIRES?

WELL, I...I JUST...LIKE HANGING OUT IN HOSPITALS. WATCHING PEOPLE BROUGHT BACK FROM DEATH.

C.P.R., INTUBATIONS, DEFIBRILLATIONS...I'M SURE IT SAYS SOMETHING ABOUT ME ON A DEEPER, PHILOSOPHICAL LEVEL.

THAT'S VERY CREEPY.

BUT IN ALL MY TIME HERE, I'VE NEVER SEEN SOMEONE COME BACK AFTER A GOOD TWENTY MINUTES.

I...I MEAN, I *WAS* THE GOD OF DEATH. I'M A MORTAL NOW. I DON'T EVEN KNOW MY NAME.

IT'S ON YOUR WRIST.

L-LAILA STARR...

LAILA STARR

OKAY...SOON, A BUNCH OF PEOPLE ARE GOING TO COME THROUGH THAT DOOR TO TAKE AWAY A DEAD PERSON.

THEY'RE GOING TO FIND YOU INSTEAD. AND TRUST ME, THEY WON'T TAKE IT WELL. THEY NEVER DO.

SO...WHAT NEXT, LAILA STARR?

I NEED TO FIND A BABY...

A BABY?

A REAL BASTARD. ONE DAY HE'LL GROW UP AND INVENT IMMORTALITY.

OH, THAT'S COOL!

NO, MUNMUN! NO IT'S NOT. THINGS ARE MEANT TO DIE. THAT WAS MY JOB AND I WAS VERY GOOD AT IT, YOU SEE?

THEN THIS BABY COMES ALONG AND THINKS HE CAN CHANGE EVERY-THING?

NOT IF I GET TO HIM HERE!

YOU'RE GOING TO KILL A BABY BECAUSE YOU GOT FIRED?

...

YES!

THAT'S TERRIBLE!

YOU THINK I CARE? I'M DEATH!

YOU WERE DEATH!

NEO-NATAL - Room 7 | 3

I'VE TAKEN MILLIONS, MERE MOMENTS INTO THEIR LIVES.

STILL TERRIBLE...

THERE HE IS, THE LITTLE DEVIL!

TO THINK THIS TINY LITTLE THING WILL DESTROY EVERYTHING I'VE EVER WORKED FOR MY WHOLE--

HIS NAME IS DARIUS.

WHAT? W-WHY DID YOU TELL ME THAT?

HE'S GOT A NAME! YOU CAN'T KILL SOMEONE WITH A NAME!

'COURSE I CAN...H-HOW HARD COULD IT BE?

JUST A TINY... LITTLE THING.

TRUST ME, LAILA. I'VE BEEN HERE A LONG WHILE AND SEEN MY SHARE OF BROKEN PEOPLE.

SOMETIMES THEY'RE RICH AND DRESSED IN NICE CLOTHES. SOMETIMES THEY OWN NOTHING OTHER THAN THE RAGS ON THEIR BACKS.

SOMETIMES THEY HAVE WHOLE FAMILIES WAITING, AND WITH OTHERS THERE'S JUST A NURSE TELLING THEM IT'LL BE OKAY.

MAYBE IT'S EASY TO MISS IT WHEN YOU'RE A GOD. BUT WHEN YOU'RE MORTAL, THERE'S ALWAYS A MOMENT.

AMID THE PAIN AND DESPAIR AND ALL THE INDIGNITIES OF A DYING BODY, THERE IS A MOMENT OF GRACE.

IT'S ALWAYS SAD AND NEVER EASY. DEATH.

I... I CAN'T!

WAAA

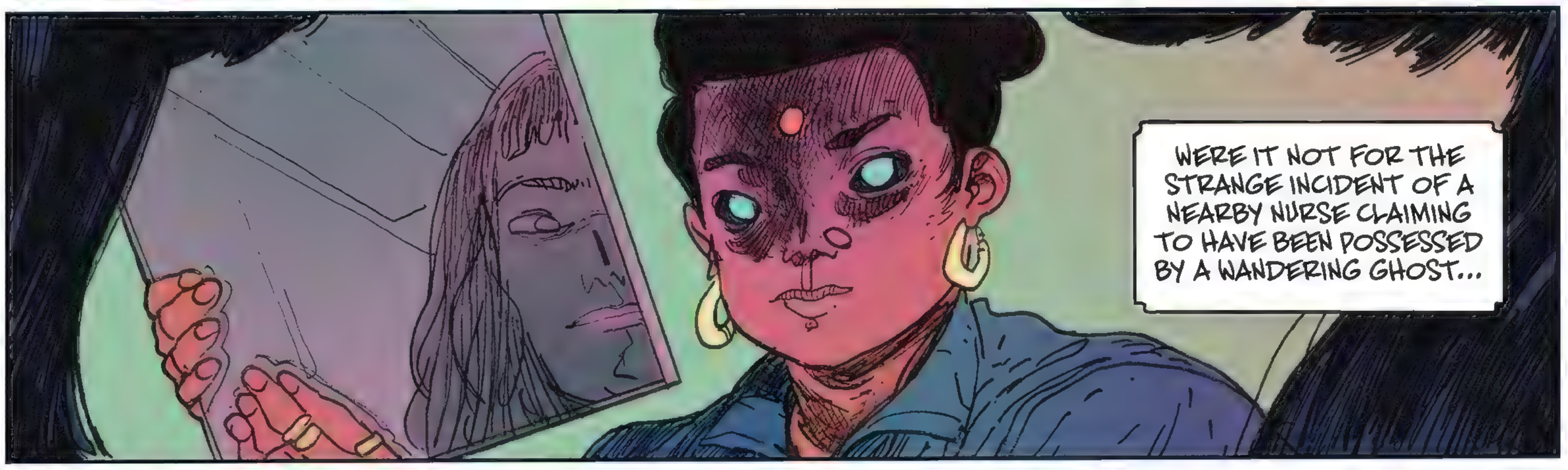
AND SO THEY CHASED THE GOD OF DEATH, STILL UNUSED TO ALL THE PECULIAR SHORTCOMINGS OF HER MORTAL BODY.

SHE RAN DOWN FLIGHTS OF STAIRS, THROUGH ENTIRE WARDS...

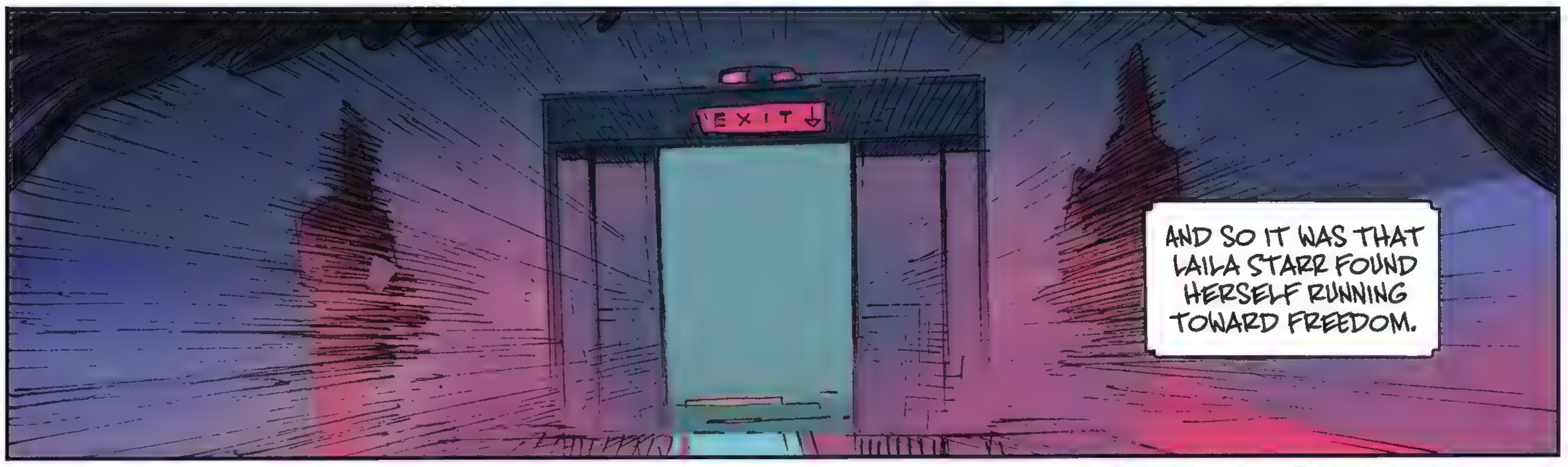
...SHOVING CARTS, PAPERS, AND PEOPLE TO SLOW DOWN THE PURSUING MOB.

BUT SOON SHE FOUND HERSELF OUT OF BREATH, AND ALL HER NEWLY PROCURED APPENDAGES HURT AND BURNED WITH EFFORT.

CLUNG!


WERE IT NOT FOR THE STRANGE INCIDENT OF A NEARBY NURSE CLAIMING TO HAVE BEEN POSSESSED BY A WANDERING GHOST...

...THEY MIGHT HAVE EVEN CAUGHT HER.


EXIT
AND SO IT WAS THAT LAILA STARR FOUND HERSELF RUNNING TOWARD FREEDOM.

BUT THE LESSER USED, ANCILLARY EXIT WAS ONLY A SHORT BOLT AWAY FROM THE BUSY STREET NEARBY.

AND IN MUMBAI, EVEN AT THAT LATE HOUR, GREAT THUNDERING WHEELS OF COMMERCE ROLLED ON UNFETTERED.

AND SO, ONLY A FEW MINUTES AWAY FROM MIDNIGHT, LAILA STARR MET HER DEATH ONCE AGAIN.

IT WAS ALL OVER THE NEWSPAPERS FOR A WHILE. THE GIRL WHO DIED AND LIVED AND DIED AGAIN.

IT MADE THE ROUNDS AMONG THE HOSPITAL STAFF. "YOU REMEMBER THAT MIRACLE SURVIVOR WHO RAN OUT IN FRONT OF A TRUCK AND THREW IT ALL AWAY?"

BUT THEN PEOPLE FORGOT. OR THE STORIES TOOK ON MEANINGS AND TURNS OF THEIR OWN, AS STORIES OFTEN DO.

SOON, NO ONE THOUGHT ABOUT LAILA STARR.

NO ONE BUT ME, THAT IS...AS I WATCHED THROUGH THE CURLING STEAM OF MY MORNING TEA.

THE GIRL WITH RAVEN HAIR. WHO WAS ALSO DEATH AND MEANT THE WORLD TO ME.

UGGGH... HAVE YOU BEEN STANDING THERE WATCHING ME SLEEP THIS WHOLE TIME?

NOT THE *WHOLE* TIME, NO.

STILL SUPER WEIRD, PRANAH.

UGGGH... WHAT HAPPENED? HOW DID I GET HERE?

LAST THING I REMEMBER WAS RUNNING OUT OF THE--

YOU *DIED.*

RUN OVER BY A TWELVE-WHEELER. IT WASN'T PRETTY.

BUT I BROUGHT YOU BACK.

YOU KNOW... OLD TIMES' SAKE. THERE'S GOT TO BE SOME PERKS TO BEING THE GOD OF LIFE, EH? =SLRRRP=

=SIGH= I COULDN'T DO IT, PRAN.

DO WHAT?

KILL THE KID WHO PUT ME OUT OF A JOB AND PULLED ME UNTO THIS EARTH A MORTAL.

HE WAS JUST A BABY...

HOW COULD YOU BRING SOMEONE LIKE THAT INTO BEING?

HEY, I ONLY GIVE THEM A LIFETIME. EVERY ONE OF THEM.

WHAT THEY DO WITH IT IS BETWEEN THEM AND...YOU, I SUPPOSE.

BESIDES, IF YOU'RE *STILL* KEEN...

...HE'S NOT A BABY ANYMORE.

Eight years from the day **LAILA STARR** died (twice).

CHAPTER TWO

THE KNOWLEDGE OF CROWS

YOU'RE A CROW.

CAW!

THIS IS A REALLY BIG CITY, ISN'T IT?

CRW?

HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO FIND THE KID?

WHO?

HEY! ISN'T THAT WHAT OWLS SAY?

WHAT?

YOU'RE A REALLY WEIRD CROW.

WELL, I'VE NEVER SEEN A TALKING HUMAN BEFORE, SO...

...WHAT GIVES?

I USED TO BE THE GODDESS OF DEATH.

OH!... RIGHT.

WELL, WHAT HAPPENED?

:SIGH: I GOT FIRED.

"THERE'S A KID NAMED DARIUS WHO WAS BORN A FEW YEARS AGO. HE'LL INVENT IMMORTALITY ONE DAY.

"SO THEY DOWNSIZED MY DEPARTMENT. AND SENT ME DOWN HERE TO LIVE AS A MORTAL.

"MY NAME'S LAILA STARR."

LAILA STARR

I'M KAH. AND I'M A FUNERAL CROW.

A WHAT?

"WELL, WHEN PEOPLE DIE HERE, SOMETIMES THEIR LAST RITES CALL FOR CROWS.

"THEY OFFER ME RICE AND I CARRY THE RECENTLY PASSED SOUL TO...TO SOMEONE IN YOUR DEPARTMENT, I SUPPOSE."

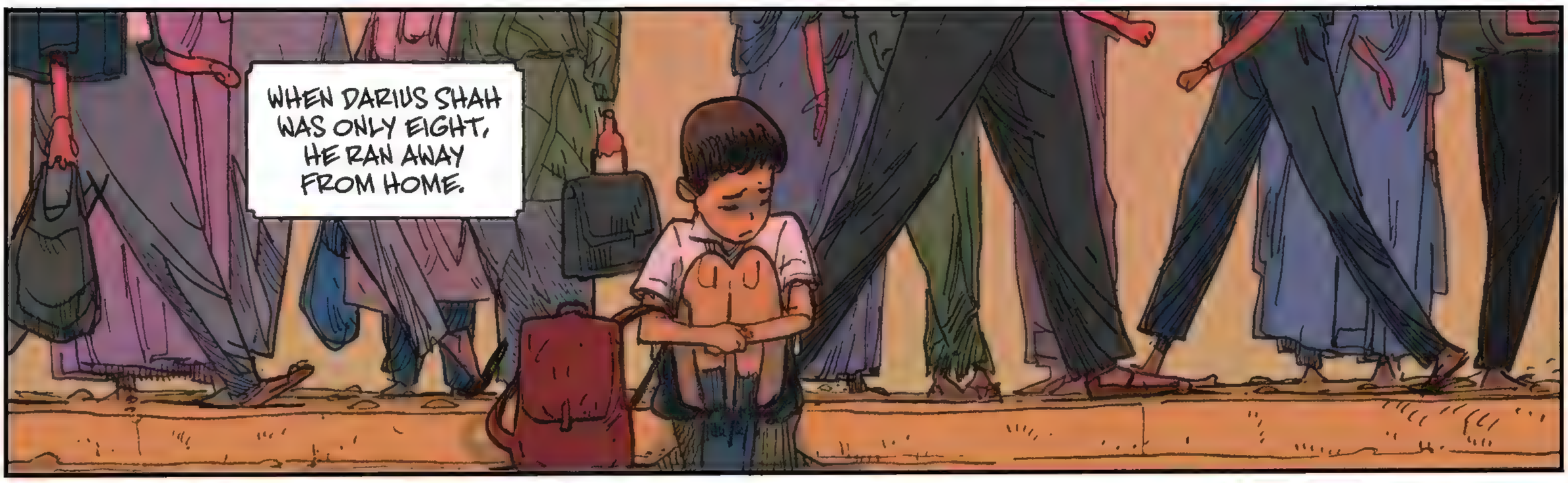
SO I GUESS WE'RE BOTH GOING THE SAME WAY, IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING.

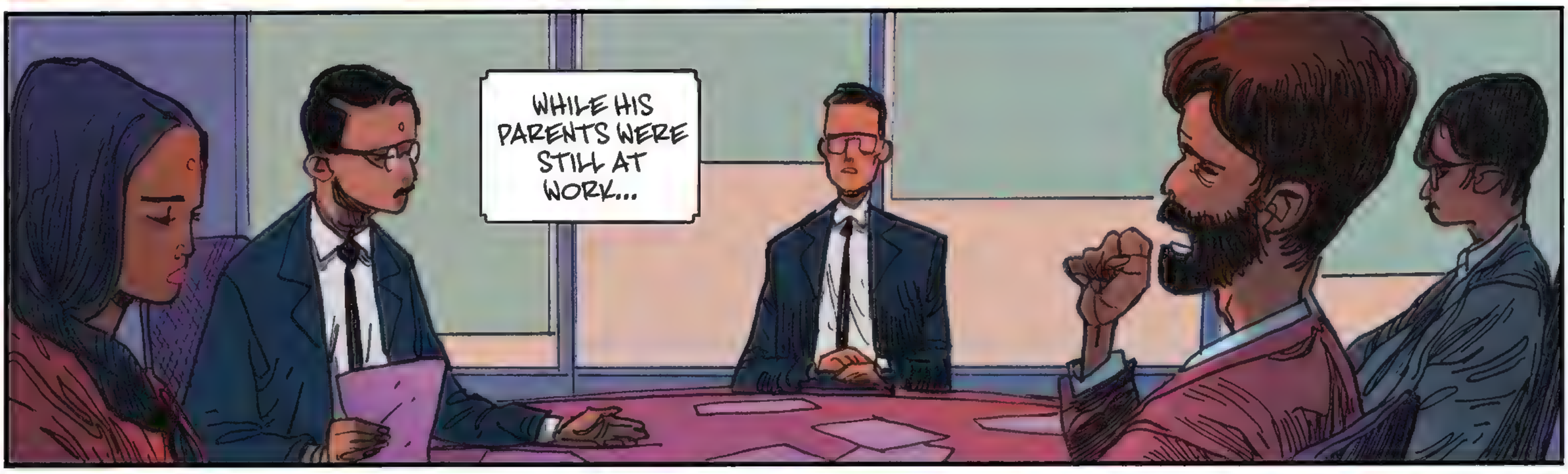
THIS CITY'S NOT SO BIG IF YOU KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING.

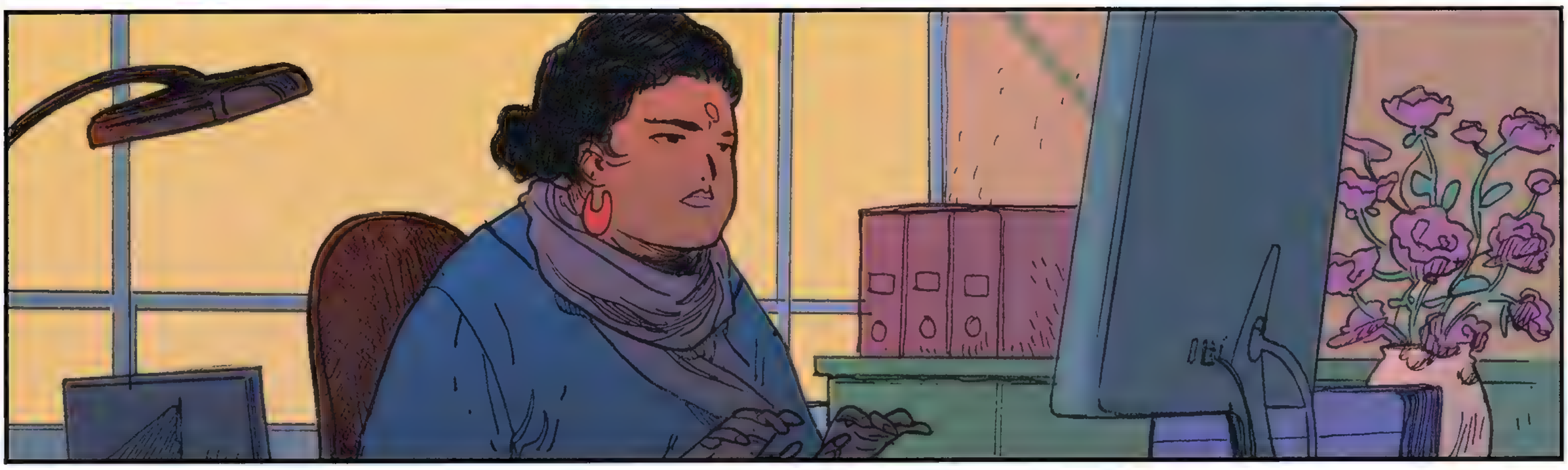
I COULD SHOW YOU AROUND. DO YOU WANT TO GO TO A FUNERAL WITH ME?

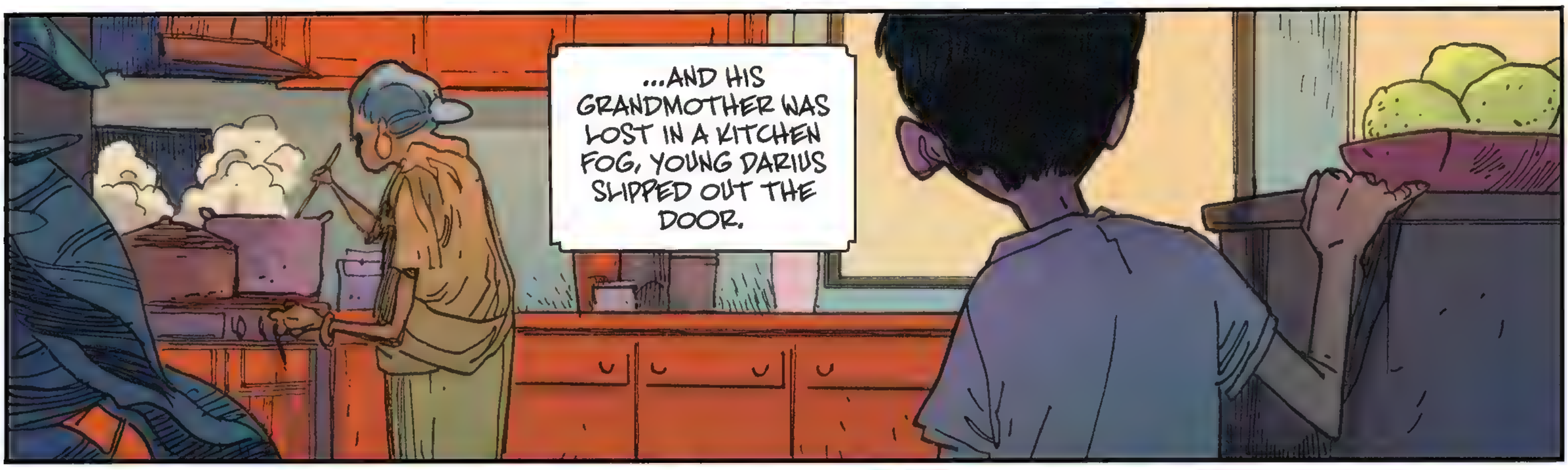
YEAH...

...WHY NOT?


WHEN DARIUS SHAH WAS ONLY EIGHT, HE RAN AWAY FROM HOME.


WHILE HIS PARENTS WERE STILL AT WORK...




...AND HIS GRANDMOTHER WAS LOST IN A KITCHEN FOG, YOUNG DARIUS SLIPPED OUT THE DOOR.

BUT HE DID NOT RUN VERY FAR, AND HIS ESCAPE FROM HOME ONLY LASTED THE LENGTH OF AN EVENING.

BUT IT WAS AN IMPORTANT EVENING.

ONE THAT WOULD GO ON TO BEAR GREAT MEANING IN THE LARGER SCHEME OF THINGS TO COME.

YOU SEE, IT WAS DARIUS'S FIRST REAL CONVERSATION WITH DEATH...

...IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE.

BEFORE THEY MOVED TO A SPRAWLING NEW DEVELOPMENT, DARIUS LIVED WITH HIS PARENTS AND HIS GRANDPARENTS IN AN OLD BUNGALOW ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF THE CITY.

BEHIND THE HOUSE WAS A PLOT OF MANGO AND JACKFRUIT AND SAPODILLA TREES.

AND EVERY OTHER DAY IN SUMMER THE PLOT WOULD NEED TENDING.

TO THIS TASK, THE SHAHS EMPLOYED A SERVANT.

A MAN FROM THE SOUTH, WHO HAD BEEN REFERRED BY THE NEIGHBOR'S HOUSEKEEPER.

THIS MAN WITH GRANITE SKIN AND TIRED AMBER EYES WORKED ALL DAY IN THE SUN--TALL AS TREES AND QUIET AS THE STILL SUMMER AIR.

FASCINATED BY THIS RARE CREATURE, DARIUS HAD ONCE ASKED HIS GRANDMOTHER...

WHAT IS HIS NAME, DADI?

TO WHICH SHE'D SAID...

BARDHAN.

OVER THE SUMMERS, BARDHAN AND DARIUS BECAME GREAT FRIENDS.

BARDHAN, WHY DOES THE SOIL NEED TURNING?

TO SET FREE THE WORMS, OF COURSE.

WITH THE BOY INFLICTING ALL MANNER OF CHILDHOOD CURIOSITIES UPON HIM...

BARDHAN, HOW DO CHAMELEONS CHANGE COLOR?

BY HOLDING THEIR BREATH, OF COURSE.

...AND BARDHAN RESPONDING WITH THE GENTLE PATIENCE OF A MAN MADE OF STONE.

BARDHAN, WHY IS YOUR SKIN SO DARK?

BECAUSE I WAS BORN OF THE MIDDAY SUN, OF COURSE.

AT THE END OF EVERY SUMMER THE JACKFRUIT WOULD RIPEN AND BARDHAN WOULD SPEND ALL DAY CHOPPING DOWN THE PRICKLY THINGS...

...BEFORE WASHING AND CUTTING OPEN THE TOUGH EXTERIOR TO GET TO THE FLESHY PODS WITHIN.

THE SWEET FLESH WAS FOR DARIUS AND HIS COUSINS, WHILE HIS GRANDMOTHER DRIED THE SEEDS AND COOKED THEM IN A SPICY BROTH.

THESE WERE DARIUS'S FAVORITE THINGS, BUT THERE WAS NEVER ANY JACKFRUIT FOR BARDHAN.

ONLY BOILED RICE, A STEW, AND A TUMBLER OF MILK.

IN FACT, BARDHAN WASN'T ALLOWED INSIDE THE HOUSE AT ALL, NOR TO USE ITS FACILITIES.

DURING THE DAY HE KEPT TO THE REAR PORCH, AND EACH EVENING BEFORE HE LEFT HE BATHED IN COLD WATER FROM THE WELL.

MOM, WHY DON'T WE SAVE SOME FOR BARDHAN?

BECAUSE THEY'RE NOT FOR HIM, CHILD. AND YOU SHOULDN'T ENCOURAGE HIM TO THINK SO.

BUT EVEN AT THAT TENDER AGE...

...DARIUS WAS NOT ONE FOR SIMPLY ACCEPTING THE RULES.

DON'T FORGET ME, EH, DARIUS?

IT WAS NOT LONG AFTER THAT THE SHAHS MOVED TO STAR GARDEN HEIGHTS.

A PLACE OF LOCKED GATES, SECURITY, MANICURED LAWNS, TENNIS COURTS, AND ELEVATED VIEWS.

SCHOOL BUS

THERE WERE NO MORE JACKFRUITS OR MANGOES, AND NO NEED FOR BARDHAN TO TURN OVER THE EARTH.

SCHOOL B

AND SO HE DISAPPEARED FROM DARIUS'S DAYS MUCH IN THE SAME WAY AS HE HAD ENTERED THEM, QUIETLY AND WITHOUT FUSS.

EVERY NOW AND THEN THERE'D BE NEWS OF HIM THAT CAME THROUGH THE HOUSEKEEPER'S GRAPEVINE.

SOME MENTION OF A JOB IN A FACTORY. SOME TALK OF A DAUGHTER'S WEDDING AND SUCH-- THINGS THAT WERE NOT PART OF AN EIGHT-YEAR-OLD'S WORLD.

THEN ONE DAY CAME THE NEWS OF ILLNESS AND OPERATIONS. AND BARDHAN'S DAUGHTER CAME BY, ALL NERVOUS AND AWKWARD, TO SAY...

...THAT BARDHAN HAD PASSED AWAY.

AT EIGHT, DARIUS HAD BEGUN TO UNDERSTAND DEATH BUT IT HAD ALWAYS BEEN A FARAWAY MYTH.

AND WHEN HE HEARD OF BARDHAN'S PASSING HE WANTED TO SEE, ONCE AGAIN, THE MAN UPON WHOSE SHOULDERS WHOLE SUMMERS HAD BEEN SPENT.

WE'VE SENT SOME MONEY FOR THE FAMILY, SO THEY CAN LOOK AFTER THEMSELVES.

AND WE DON'T VISIT THEIR FUNERALS. IT IS...

"...INAPPROPRIATE."

I TRIED TO KILL HIM...

THE KID?

YEAH...

YEESH...

BUT I COULDN'T.

SINCE THE BEGINNING I HAVE REAPED THE LIVING... WHOLE GENERATIONS. BUT NOW, A MORTAL, I COULDN'T TAKE...ONE TINY THING?

IT'S DIFFERENT.

IT'S DIFFERENT.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND IT, THOUGH. THIS MORTAL PREOCCUPATION WITH DEATH.

"THE CEREMONY, THE GRAVITY OF RITUAL."

DO YOU NOT SEE IT?

IT'S THE ONE THING THAT IS THEIRS.

NOT DEATH ITSELF, BUT WHAT YOU LEAVE BEHIND.

"THEY BURN THE BODY BECAUSE THE SOUL IS IMMORTAL. BUT IT IS REINCARNATED INTO ANOTHER CYCLE.

"THE ONLY THING THAT MARKS EACH LIFETIME THEN ARE THE MEMORIES LEFT BEHIND.

"TO BE WITNESSED BY SOMEONE ELSE AND TO BE REMEMBERED WHEN YOU ARE GONE. THESE ARE THE THINGS THAT BELONG TO MORTALS."

DON'T FORGET ME, EH, DARIUS?

I WONDER IF YOU EVEN REMEMBER THOSE THAT YOU TOOK.

BUT TAKING A LIFE AS A MORTAL?...YOU WOULD HAVE HAD TO LIVE WITH THAT.

IT'S DIFFERENT.

WE'RE ON THE SHORES AT WALKESHWAR. PAST THE PYRES IS THE ARABIAN SEA, WHERE THE ASHES ARE OFTEN DISPERSED.

THEY SAY THE WATER HOLDS THE MEMORY OF ALL THINGS COMMITTED TO IT.

I SHOULD GET GOING. THEY'VE PUT OUT THE RICE.

SNIF

SNIF

WHAT'S THE MATTER, KID? YOU HERE BY YOURSELF?

HE'S NOT COMING BACK, IS HE?

THAT'S USUALLY HOW IT WORKS, YEAH.

I...I USED TO THINK HE WAS A GOD OF SOME SORT. A CREATURE FROM A STORY, FROM A DIFFERENT WORLD, MISTAKENLY LEFT BEHIND.

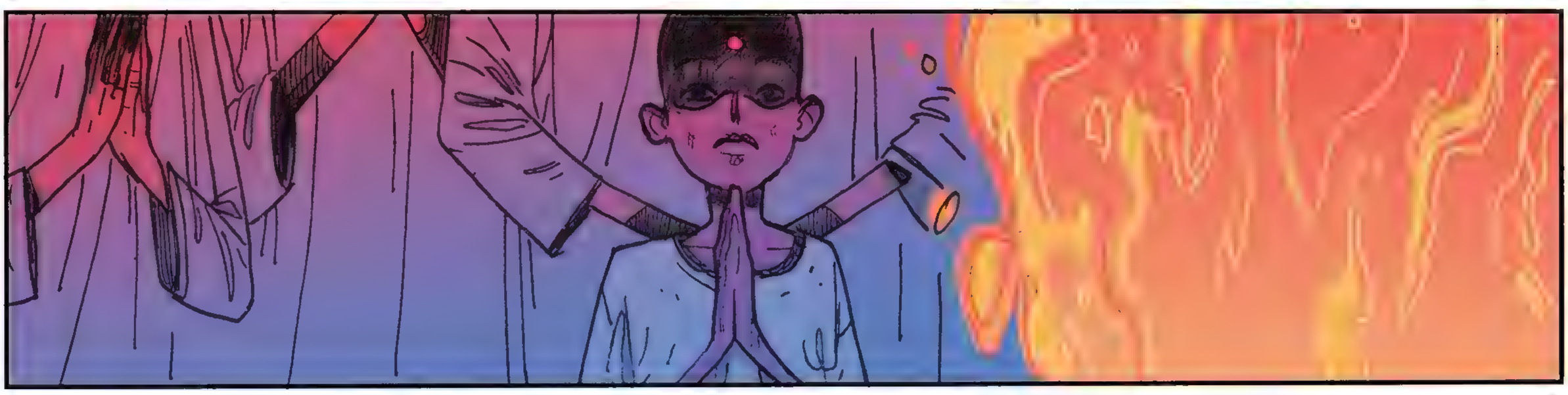
HOW CAN SUCH A THING DIE? HOW CAN HE GO AWAY FOREVER?

GODS CAN'T DIE, CAN THEY?

I'VE JUST LEARNED TODAY THAT THOSE ARE DIFFERENT THINGS... DYING AND GOING AWAY FOREVER.

IF LIFE'S AN EXERCISE IN MAKING MEMORIES...

NO ONE REALLY GOES AWAY AS LONG AS THEY ARE REMEMBERED.



I WON'T...I WON'T FORGET HIM!

HEY! HEY, KID! YOU CAN'T JUST...

DAMN IT!

WHY SHE FOLLOWED HIM THEN WAS A MYSTERY EVEN TO HER.

PERHAPS SHE WAS CONCERNED AT LEAVING A LONE CHILD TO MAKE HIS WAY THROUGH THE CROWD BY HIMSELF.

PERHAPS SHE WAS CURIOUS ABOUT WHAT A BOY SO YOUNG SOUGHT TO ACHIEVE THEN.

PERHAPS THESE ARE MATTERS OF UNSPOKEN CONNECTIONS.

BUT SHE LOST HIM IN THE CROWD AMID A PROCESSION OF GRIEVING FAMILIES WALKING TOWARD THE WATER.

SHE TRIED EXPLAINING TO THEM THAT SHE WAS LOOKING FOR A LITTLE BOY...

...BUT ALL THEY DID WAS STUFF MARIGOLDS IN HER HANDS AND USHER HER TOWARD THE WATER.

SHE DOESN'T KNOW QUITE WHY SHE WENT ALONG. PERHAPS SHE WAS TRYING TO BE POLITE.

PERHAPS SHE WANTED TO KNOW WHAT IT WAS TO MOURN A LIFE. TO FEEL THE WEIGHT OF MORTALITY PULL AT HER.

AS SHE STEPS INTO THE WATER, SHE HEARS THE BOY ON THE SHORE.

IN THE COMMOTION AROUND HIM, HIS MOTHER'S VOICE SOUNDS, THANKFUL FOR HAVING FOUND HIM.

OH THANK GOD I FOUND YOU, DARIUS.

"DARIUS." SHE SAYS HIS NAME.

DA...RI...US.

THEN THE WATER'S CHILL CREEPS UP HER FOOT, AND SHE REMEMBERS KAH'S WORDS.

SHE REMEMBERS ABOUT THE MEMORY OF ALL THINGS COMMITTED TO THE WATER.

SHE FEELS THE COUNTLESS HANDS OF THE SOULS SHE REAPED AS A GOD NOW PULLING HER UNDER.

INTENT UPON REMINDING HER OF HER OWN MORTALITY.

OR PERHAPS IT WAS ONLY A RIPTIDE. WHO IS TO SAY?

=COUGH=
=SPUTTER=

=GASP=...THANK YOU...FOR SAVING ME.

SAVING YOU?...I'M A FUNERAL CROW, MY DEAR. I ONLY CARRY THE SOULS OF THE DEAD.

OH...

...CRAP.

WE REALLY HAVE TO STOP DOING THIS, YOU KNOW?

I CAN'T KEEP BRINGING YOU BACK...I'M GOING TO GET INTO REAL TROUBLE WITH THE GUYS UP TOP!

UGGHH... HOW LONG WAS I OUT THIS TIME?

Twelve years from the day **LAILA STARR** drowned.

CHAPTER THREE

UP IN SMOKE

MY LIFE BEGAN JUST AFTER HER SECOND COURVOISIER.

DEATH HAD FOUND HERSELF A SNUG CRANNY BETWEEN THE QUILTED ARM AND THE BACKREST.

THESE DAYS SHE WAS ALL ABOUT LIVING IT UP. THE YEAR PAST HAD BEEN SET TO AN ENDLESS BASSLINE AND AWASH IN RAFFISH DANCEFLOOR LIGHTING.

SHE HAD PARTAKEN IN THE MORTAL PLEASURES--IN FOOD AND DRINK AND SEX...LOST PHONE NUMBERS, MORNING COFFEES, AND...

TOBACCO

...CIGARETTES.

I WAS BROUGHT INTO THE WORLD WITH A KISS AND A PHOSPHOROUS FLAME. A MOMENT IN WHICH I IMAGINE WE WERE BOTH TRULY ALIVE.

MATCH

I KNEW HER BETTER THAN SHE UNDERSTOOD. THE GIRL WHO WAS DEATH COME DOWN TO LIVE AMONGST THE MORTALS--LAILA STARR.

I HAD SPENT ALL OF LAST WEEK IN HER JACKET POCKET, LISTENING TO HER HEART.

I MIGHT HAVE EVEN HAD A CRUSH ON HER, BUT HAD I KNOWN HOW THINGS WOULD TURN OUT IN THE END...

I SUPPOSE SOME OF US ARE JUST DESTINED TO BURN.

NEWLY AFLAME AND ABANDONED TO PONDER LIFE UPON MY OWN GAUDY MEMENTO MORI...
...I LOOKED BEYOND THE EMPTY COUCH TO THE REVELING CROWD FOR CAMARADERIE...

...AND CAME UPON A KINDRED SOUL.
YOUNG DARIUS SHAH, WITH ALL THE NERVOUS ENERGY OF LIFE, NEWLY KINDLED INTO ADOLESCENCE AND SET ADRIFT...
...INTO THIS PULSING THRONG OF GOOD COMPANY, BAD DECISIONS, MISBEHAVIOR, LOVE, LUST, AND HEARTBREAK.
I HAD ASSUMED THAT LIKE ME HE WAS QUITE ALONE...

...UNTIL DANIKA SEN ARRIVED LIKE A BREEZE AND SET HIM ALL ABLAZE.

SHE PULLED HIM INTO A KISS AND THEN I HEARD HER WHISPER...

I'M SORRY, DARIUS. BUT LIFE IS TOO SHORT TO ARRIVE AT THE END WITHOUT ANY BROKEN HEARTS TO SHOW FOR IT.

I DO LOVE YOU BUT THIS IS IT.

I'M BREAKING UP WITH YOU

YOU CAN THANK ME LATER.

OF COURSE, TO UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT OF ALL OF THIS, WE SHOULD PROBABLY GO BACK...

...ALL THE WAY TO THE PILLOW FACTORY WHERE THE THREE OF THEM FIRST BEGAN THEIR FRIENDSHIPS.

HOW DO I KNOW SO MUCH OF THEIR PAST? WHAT MAKES THIS MARLBORO OMNISCIENT?

YOU MUST REMEMBER, VERY EARLY ON I WAS KISSED BY DEATH, AND THAT BRINGS WITH IT UNTOLD POWER.

MUCH LIKE THIS PLACE--WHERE THE DREAMS COMPANY HAD IN THE EIGHTIES HIRED HUNDREDS OF EMPLOYEES TO SEW DOWN FEATHERS INTO PILLOWS.

AND HAD PROUDLY PROCLAIMED ITS MOTTO ON THE WALL.

NOW, AMID THE SILENT SEWING MACHINES AND MOUNDS OF DOWN HEAPED INTO CLOUDS, DARIUS, ZAFFAR, AND DANIKA SPENT THEIR LOST HOURS...

...ENGROSSED IN THE GREAT RITUALS OF YOUTH.

WRITING THEIR OWN DREAMS ONTO PEELING WALLS.

AND NEGOTIATING VULNERABILITIES WITH THE UNSPOKEN LANGUAGE OF LAUGHTER, CONFESSIONS, AND STOLEN CIGARETTES.

HOW DID YOU GUYS FIND THIS PLACE?

ZAFFAR DID.

THEY SHOT AN ADVERT IN THE BACK BEHIND THE BUILDING A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO.

I HELPED OUT ON THE SHOOT, CAME OUT HERE FOR A BREAK AND UHH...

...NEVER QUITE LEFT, I SUPPOSE. FOR OVER A YEAR THIS RUIN HAS BEEN MY DOMAIN. THE CATHEDRAL OF KING ZAFFAR!

DARIUS HERE WAS SUPPOSED TO KEEP IT A SECRET.

AW, C'MON! DANIKA'S COOL, MAN.

RE THE PUREST FORM

OF ART

SHOULD'VE PUT UP MY OWN DAMN SIGN ON THE WALL.

NO GIRLS ALLOWED!

ASS!

WHAT'RE YOU, LIKE TEN?

BESIDES, YOU GUYS WOULD BE TOTAL LOSERS IF IT WASN'T FOR ME HANGING OUT WITH YOU.

THAT'S VERY TRUE!

BUT I'VE ALWAYS BEEN OKAY WITH THE SOCIAL FREEFALL THAT MY ADOLESCENT LIFE HAS BEEN, DANI.

COMFORTABLE IN MY GRACELESS DESCENT.

HOLY CRAP! ZAFFAR!

IT'S DARIUS WHO HAS A PROBLEM LETTING GO, YOU SEE?

SO THE REAL QUESTION, DANIKA, IS WHY ARE YOU HERE?

IS IT THE LOSER POET DARIUS'S MELANCHOLY CHARMS?

OR MORBID CURIOSITY ABOUT THAT WASTREL ZAFFAR?

YOU'RE SUCH AN ASSHOLE, ZAF!

AT THIS POINT I HAD LIVED THROUGH ABOUT HALF MY LIFE. SO I UNDERSTAND THAT IN HIS MOMENT OF HEARTBREAK...

...DARIUS SHAH BEGAN TO CONTEMPLATE A MORTALITY OF HIS OWN.

THE DEATH OF INNOCENCE.

THE SORT THAT LEADS YOU TO BELIEVE THAT YOU ONLY FIND LOVE ONCE.

AND THERE, GASPING FOR FRESH AIR AT THE EDGE OF A 14TH FLOOR BALCONY, HE HAD A MIGHTY SENSE OF DÉJÀ VU.

THE UNSHAKABLE FEELING THAT HE HAD BEEN THERE BEFORE.

A LOST CHILD HOLDING HIS HEART IN HIS HAND ONCE MORE, ABANDONED ON SOME UNFAMILIAR SHORE.

LOOKING AT HER.

ROUGH NIGHT?

=SIGH= IT'S NOTHING...

THAT'S MY CIGARETTE, YOU KNOW?

MY BEST FRIEND DIED.

=SIGH= MY GIRLFRIEND BROKE UP WITH ME.

WELL, WHICH ONE IS IT?

WE FOUGHT.

YOUR GIRLFRIEND?

NO, MY BEST FRIEND...WE FOUGHT BEFORE HE DIED.

WHAT DID YOU FIGHT ABOUT?

MY GIRLFRIEND.

OH...

"PERHAPS HE LIKED HER, TOO.

"OR MAYBE HE LIKED ME TOO MUCH TO SHARE, WHO KNOWS?

"HE WAS ALWAYS THE TYPE NOT TO USE WORDS WHERE A FIST WOULD DO.

"HE GAVE ME A BLACK EYE. I SAID TERRIBLE THINGS TO HIM.

"I LEFT THE PILLOW FACTORY VOWING NEVER TO RETURN."

Ahh!

"AND THEN THE WORLD FELL APART.

"SOMEONE SET A TRAIN ON FIRE. SOMEONE MADE AN INCENDIARY SPEECH.

"SOME WANTED A TEMPLE BUILT. OTHERS WANTED AN EDIFICE TORN DOWN.

"PEOPLE TOOK UP ARMS IN THE NAME OF GREAT MEN AND GODS AND SET THE WHOLE CITY ON FIRE.

"THIS FRAGILE THING WE'D BUILT FOR YEARS FELL APART IN MOMENTS.

"AND SOMEWHERE AMID THE INFERNO OF GREATER THINGS, THEY TOOK MY FRIEND."

"I IMAGINE HE WAS STILL AT THE FACTORY WHEN THE RIOTING MOB CAUGHT SIGHT OF HIM.

"OR PERHAPS THEY CHASED HIM IN THERE.

"THE FIRE LASTED FOR DAYS, THEY SAY. THE MOUNTAINS OF DOWN FEATHERS BECAME FUEL TO THE FLAME.

"I WISH I COULD WALK IN THERE AND READ ALL OF ZAFFAR'S SCRAWLINGS ONCE AGAIN, BUT THE WALLS ARE ALL CHARRED, YOU SEE.

"THEY USED TO MAKE DREAMS IN THIS PLACE ONCE.

WE DONT JUST MAKE PILLOWS

"NOW THEY'RE ALL COVERED IN SOOT."

I CAN'T HAVE HIM BACK, CAN I? I CAN'T TAKE BACK ALL THE THINGS I SAID TO HIM.

WE FOUGHT A LOT BECAUSE I WANTED TO BE HIM.

IT'S WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THINGS DIE.

THEY GO AWAY, BUT YOU DON'T REALIZE ALL THE PARTS OF YOU THAT THEY WERE HOLDING UP UNTIL AFTER.

DANIKA BELIEVES A PART OF ME BURNED AWAY WITH ZAF IN THE PILLOW FACTORY THAT NIGHT.

THAT'S WHY SHE'S BREAKING UP WITH ME. CAN'T BE IN LOVE WITH HALF A BOY, I SUPPOSE.

AND IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOW, THE POSSIBILITIES OF WHAT COULD'VE BEEN BEGIN TO FALL AWAY.

LEAVING YOU WITH LESS, EACH TIME--MORE PRECIOUS, TO BE SAVORED.

LIKE A CIGARETTE.

THE POINT OF LIFE, MY FRIEND, IS TO BE SMOKED.

SHE SAYS THIS, OFFERING THE LAST BIT OF ME TO DARIUS.

THE HEADY TRILL OF FIRE AND CHEMICALS TALKING TO THE BRAIN.

THE LAST BIT THAT I HAVE TO OFFER.

WHO MADE YOU THE EXPERT ON LIFE?

WITH THAT DARIUS SHAH LEAVES, AND AS HE DOES SO HE TAKES THE LAST PUFF OF LIFE FROM ME.

I LOOK BACK AND WATCH LAILA SEDUCE ANOTHER CIGARETTE TO HER LIPS.

BUT I WILL GO AWAY KNOWING THAT THE CLOSEST DEATH GOT TO THIS YOUNG MAN IN THIS LIFETIME WAS TO SHARE A CIGARETTE WITH HIM.

BECAUSE THERE IS A FIRE LATER.

THE WHOLE APARTMENT GOES UP IN SMOKE.

THE FIRE DEPARTMENT WOULD LATER STATE THAT THEY MIGHT SUSPECT A CARELESS EMBER FROM A BURNING CIGARETTE.

AND THE PARTYGOERS WERE LUCKY TO HAVE LEFT THE PLACE WITH ONLY ONE CASUALTY CLAIMED BY THE FIRE.

"A FIRE STARTED BY A CIGARETTE? REALLY?"

"YEAH...YOU KNOW, I ALMOST THINK YOU'RE DOING IT ON PURPOSE."

ARE YOU *TRYING* TO GET ME IN TROUBLE UPSTAIRS?

PFFFT...THEY LOVE YOU UP THERE. YOU COULD TAKE A CRAP ON THE WHOLE WORLD AND THEY'D STILL LOVE YOU UP THERE.

YOU'RE PRANAH, THE GOD OF LIFE. THIS WHOLE PLACE IS AN ODE TO YOU.

I'M *NOTHING* WITHOUT YOU.

ME, ON THE OTHER HAND...THEY HAVE NO NEED FOR.

HAH!... TELL *THAT* TO BLOODY DARIUS SHAH.

YOU KNOW HE WAS AT THE PARTY?

REALLY?

...N-NO...IT CAN'T POSSIBLY HAVE BEEN...

I, UHH...I'VE KEPT TRACK OF HIM SINCE. THIS IS WHERE HE LIVES NOW.

...IF YOU STILL WANT TO TALK TO HIM, THAT IS.

HE MIGHT BE A LITTLE OLDER THAN YOU REMEMBER, OF COURSE.

CIGARETTE?

UGH, NO...

...THOSE THINGS WILL KILL YOU.

Sixteen years from the day LAÏLA STARR died in a fire.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

HELLO?

HELLO.

UHH... WHO SAID THAT?

I DID.

GOD?

HRRMMM. NO...I AM THIS PLACE. THIS TEMPLE.

YOU CAN HEAR ME?

OH, YEAH...WEIRD, HUH?

I'M LAILA STARR~ I USED TO BE THE GODDESS OF DEATH. THEN I GOT FIRED AND I DIED A FEW TIMES.

YOU DON'T NEED DETAILS...

BUT I CAN HEAR AND TALK TO ALL KINDS OF THINGS.

SO HOW COME THERE'S NO ONE HERE?

ON MOST DAYS...WEI IS HERE. HRRRMMM. BUT I DON'T KNOW... WHERE HE IS TODAY.

WEI?

"OHHH YES. WEI'S ALWAYS THE FIRST FOOTSTEPS...ON THE STREET EACH MORNING.

"LONG BEFORE THE MILKMAN'S BICYCLE... OR THE RICKSHAWS AWAKENING FROM THEIR BACKSEAT SLUMBERS... HRRRRMMM.

"...WEI'S HERE SWEEPING THE DUST FROM MY STEPS...AND LETTING THE WAKING AIR IN THROUGH MY WINDOWS.

"HE SPENDS MOST OF HIS DAY HERE...LEAVING ONLY FOR LUNCH.

"HE NEVER LOCKS MY DOORS...HRRRMMMM. ONLY PULLS THE LATCH SHUT. I LIKE THAT.

"THEY KNOW HIM BY NAME AT ALL THE SHOPS DOWN THE STREET."

"I'VE KNOWN HIM SINCE HE WAS A LITTLE BOY... HRRRRMMMM. BACK WHEN MY FIRST BRICKS WERE LAID.

"HIS FATHER HAD COME...ALL THE WAY FROM HEIHAN IN CHINA TO WORK AT THE MILLS IN BOMBAY.

"THINGS CHANGED OVER THE YEARS... GENERATIONS CAME AND WENT...MOST OF THEM WENT BACK, AND OTHERS MOVED ON.

"AND PERHAPS THE CITY BECAME A LESS WELCOMING PLACE, BUT WEI STAYED.

"MY MANDARIN ISN'T VERY GOOD ANYMORE...BUT MY HINDI AND MARATHI ARE GREAT. WHERE WILL I GO?' HE SAYS.

"HE AND I ARE OF A KIND, NOW. WEI IS THE LAST OF THE MILL WORKER IMMIGRANTS IN THIS CITY...

"AND I'M THE ONLY CHINESE TEMPLE LEFT HERE. HRRRMMM."

OH, LOOK AT ME HRRRRMBLING ON.

SORRY...IT'S JUST BEEN SO LONG SINCE I'VE HAD ANY VISITORS.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO ASK FOR A BLESSING?

OH... UHH, I THINK I'M OKAY. I'M NOT REALLY SURE WHAT TO ASK FOR.

BUT I WILL ASK FOR A FAVOR.

I CAME HERE LOOKING FOR SOMEONE, BUT I THINK I'M LOST.

DO YOU KNOW THIS PLACE?

OH YES...YES, OF COURSE. YOU'RE JUST ONE STREET OVER, IF I HRRRMEMBER CORRECTLY.

IF YOU'RE GOING THERE, COULD YOU CHECK ON WEI FOR ME? HE LIVES IN THE BLUE CHAWL...ON THE CORNER.

SURE!

"JUST WALK DOWN AND MAKE A LEFT AT THE OLD TIMBERMART...AND KEEP GOING 'TIL YOU'RE AT THE END OF THE ROAD."

"IT'S THE PLACE WITH THE BIG RED DOOR.

"I'D HURRY, THOUGH... HRRRRMM. IT LOOKS LIKE IT'S GOING TO RAIN."

KNOCK KNOCK

BY THE AGE OF 36, AS FATE WOULD HAVE IT, DARIUS SHAH HAD OBTAINED MUCH OF WHAT ANYONE COULD ASK FOR IN A LIFETIME.

A BEAUTIFUL HOME.

WEALTH, FAME, RESPECT.

A JOB THAT BROUGHT HIM JOY...

GENIUS INNOVATOR DARIUS SHAH LOS AND BUS

...AND A FAMILY HE GREATLY LOVED.

AND YET, EVEN AS LAILA STARR STOLE THROUGH HIS HOME THAT DAY, SHE FELT THE HEAVY PALL LURKING WITHIN.

I SAW YOU.

THROUGH THE WINDOW AS YOU CAME UP THE STREET, I SAW YOU AND I TOOK A GOOD LONG LOOK.

GO AHEAD, SIT DOWN.

I...

SIT. PLEASE.

IT WAS YOU, WASN'T IT?

AT THE BEACH WHEN I WAS A KID. THEN AT THE PARTY YEARS LATER.

THE NIGHT DANIKA BROKE UP WITH ME.

BRUNO MUNARI

I WAS ONLY 20 THEN. WHAT DID YOU SAY THAT NIGHT?

"THE POINT OF LIFE IS TO BE SMOKED."

Y-YES... THAT WAS ME.

SORRY, I'D OFFER YOU A DRINK...BUT YOU DON'T LOOK OF A DRINKING AGE.

TELL ME, HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE?

WHO ARE YOU?

I...I DON'T KNOW HOW TO EXPLAIN.

"YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND, ANYWAY."

TRY ME.

I...I USED TO BE A GOD.

I MEAN...I WAS JUST A STUDENT ONCE. THEN I DIED...A FEW TIMES.

AND NOW A GOD LIVES IN MY BODY. I MEAN...I LIVE IN LAILA'S BODY, I SUPPOSE.

WHAT KIND OF GOD?

LOOK, DARIUS...I CAME HERE TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT SOMETHING.

WELL...TALK YOU *OUT* OF SOMETHING, REALLY--

DON'T CHANGE THE SUBJECT...

...LAILA STARR.

YES... YOU SEE, I LOOKED INTO YOU AFTER THE FIRE AT THE PARTY.

IT WAS ALL OVER THE LOCAL PAPERS. "UNLUCKY GIRL DIES IN LOCAL HIGH-RISE FIRE."

WHAT A PITY, LAILA STARR.

BUT THEN I THOUGHT TO MYSELF, NO, THAT CANNOT BE. SHE'S THE SAME GIRL I SAW AT WALKESHWAR WHEN I WAS ONLY EIGHT.

BUT YOU DON'T FORGET THESE THINGS. THE MEMORIES ARE IMMORTAL. THEY REFINE THEMSELVES TO PERFECTION OVER TIME.

I REMEMBER YOUR FACE AND IT HAS NOT CHANGED.

SIXTEEN YEARS ON AND NOT ONE WRINKLE SINCE THAT DAY.

AND THEN, I REALIZED THE COMMON THREAD IN ALL THE TIMES WE MET.

"WE MET AFTER BARDHAN DIED.

"THEN AGAIN AFTER ZAFFAR."

SO I'LL ASK AGAIN...WHAT KIND OF GOD WERE YOU?

DEATH...

...I WAS DEATH.

KRRK-ASH

YOU HAVE *SOME NERVE* SHOWING UP HERE!

MARS

ART&SCIENCE

VAC-
ON PA-

GENIUS INNOVATOR
DARIUS SHAH LOSES
WIFE AND BUSINESS
PARTNER MENAKA
TO CANCER

WHY? WHY HER?

SHE DID NOTHING TO DESERVE IT.

I LOVED HER AND I KNEW SHE LOVED ME BACK. DO YOU KNOW HOW RARE THAT IS?

DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? I DON'T WORK WITHOUT HER.

MAYBE YOU DON'T GET IT BECAUSE YOU'RE THE GOD OF DEATH. BUT WE MORTALS...WE DON'T WORK WITHOUT EACH OTHER.

WHY DID YOU TAKE MENAKA? HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO GO ON?

I...I DIDN'T! I'M NOT A GOD ANYMORE, DARIUS. I JUST WANTED TO--

LIES! LOOK AT YOURSELF!

NONE OF US GET SECOND AND THIRD CHANCES, LAILA STARR.

IT SEEMS THE WORLD CAN'T BE RID OF YOU EVEN IF IT WANTED TO. WHAT MAKES *YOU* SO SPECIAL?

EVEN AS DARIUS'S WORDS RANG IN HER EARS, LAILA STARR WAS AFRAID FOR THE FIRST TIME.

NOT OF DEATH, OR THE ANGRY MAN IN FRONT OF HER. BUT AFRAID OF THE PROSPECT OF HAVING TO GO ON LIKE THIS.

A TANGLED MESS OF EMOTIONS, LIVING A LIFE FULL OF QUESTIONS AND UTTERLY BEREFT OF ANY ANSWERS.

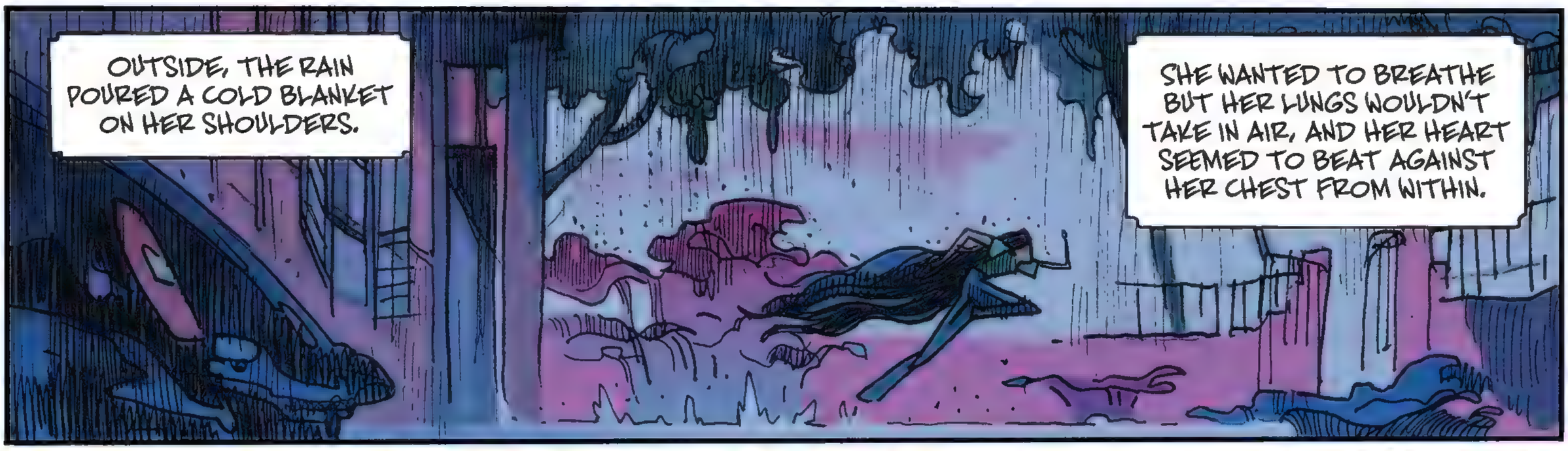
IN DARIUS SHAH'S HOME, LAILA WAS SAVED BY AN UNEXPECTED INTERVENTION.

D... DAD?

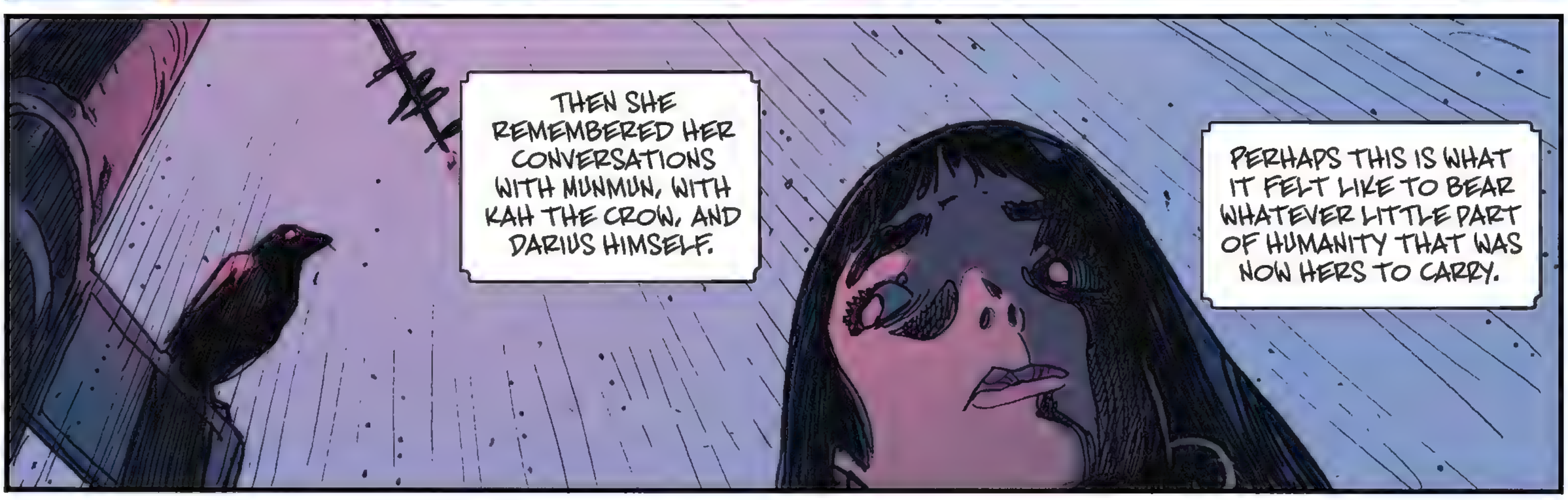
I WILL FIND A WAY TO KEEP YOU FROM TAKING ANY MORE OF US, YOU HEAR?

"THERE WILL BE NO PLACE FOR DEATH HERE. NOT ANYMORE."

SHE RAN FROM HIS DOOR WITH HIS WORDS STILL HAUNTING HER STEPS.


OUTSIDE, THE RAIN POURED A COLD BLANKET ON HER SHOULDERS.
SHE WANTED TO BREATHE BUT HER LUNGS WOULDN'T TAKE IN AIR, AND HER HEART SEEMED TO BEAT AGAINST HER CHEST FROM WITHIN.

THERE, SHE EXPERIENCED GUILT FOR THE FIRST TIME.
BUT SHE COULD NOT UNDERSTAND WHY. NONE OF THIS WAS HER FAULT, AFTER ALL. PEOPLE DIE ALL THE TIME, SHE TOLD HERSELF.


THEN SHE REMEMBERED HER CONVERSATIONS WITH MUNMUN, WITH KAH THE CROW, AND DARIUS HIMSELF.
PERHAPS THIS IS WHAT IT FELT LIKE TO BEAR WHATEVER LITTLE PART OF HUMANITY THAT WAS NOW HERS TO CARRY.

SHE SAT FOR HOURS WATCHING THE GOINGS-ON OUTSIDE THE CHAWL WHERE WEI HAD LIVED.

SHE WATCHED UNTIL THE LIGHTS CAME ON IN ALL THE HOUSES ON EVERY FLOOR AND THE SUN WENT DOWN IN HUES OF RED AND PURPLE.

THERE WERE CROWS YET, IN THE SKY. AND A QUIET CROWD DRESSED IN WHITE. BUT SHE NEEDED NONE OF THESE THINGS...

...TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE REASON WEI HADN'T SHOWN UP AT THE TEMPLE WAS BECAUSE HE HAD PASSED AWAY.

HELLO, LAILA. IT'S RAINING QUITE... HEAVILY OUTSIDE, ISN'T IT?

DID YOU FIND WHAT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR?

YES...

DID YOU CHECK IN ON WEI FOR ME?

HE'S GONE. HE DIED YESTERDAY.

=SNFFF=

OH...

OH...

...HRRRMMM.

LISTEN...THEY SAY IT'S GOING TO STORM ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT.

YOU CAN STAY HERE IF YOU'D LIKE? AND IN THE MORNING...WHEN YOU AWAKE...WOULD YOU LEAVE MY DOORS OPEN?

"MAYBE SOMEONE ELSE WILL WALK IN."

STORM KALI CAUSES DEVASTATION

WORST FLOODING IN YEARS

CLAIMS LAST CHINESE TEMPLE IN THE CITY

=HRMPF= THE ARTICLE DOESN'T EVEN MENTION ME.

I WAS IN THERE WHEN THE TEMPLE FELL.

MUMBAI HERALD

I THINK IT DIED BECAUSE IT COULDN'T GO ON WITHOUT ITS FRIEND.

LOT OF THINGS AND PEOPLE DIED IN THAT STORM, HON.

SOMETIMES, THAT'S HOW YOU GO. UNMENTIONED AND NAMELESS.

I HAD SOME TROUBLE BRINGING YOU BACK THIS TIME, YOU KNOW?

HAD TO, UHH...MAKE SOME DEALS SO THEY'D LET ME.

"I GET THE FEELING THEY DON'T REALLY LIKE YOU UP THERE."

I KNEW SHE'D BE UP TO NO GOOD ONCE SHE GOT DOWN THERE.

AGNI, MAKE A NOTE. WE SHOULD MAKE ALL OUTGOING STAFF SIGN SOMETHING.

SOME SORT OF NON-DISRUPTION AGREEMENT. SEND A MEMO?

SHE'S JUST ACTING OUT BECAUSE SHE WANTS MY CORNER OFFICE. SHE'S ALWAYS BEEN A VINDICTIVE LITTLE--

I COULDN'T CARE LESS. NOT LIKE I'LL BE SEEING THEM AGAIN.

I THINK I ACTUALLY PUSHED DARIUS INTO THIS WHOLE IMMORTALITY BUSINESS.

OH, I WOULDN'T BE SO SURE...

YOUR BOY HASN'T DELIVERED ON THAT PROMISED IMMORTALITY YET.

AND HE'S PRETTY CLOSE TO RUNNING OUT OF TIME.

Twenty-eight years from the day **LAÏLA STARR** was buried under a broken temple.

CHAPTER FIVE

POETRY

IF WE MUST SPEAK OF THE END, THEN I SUPPOSE IT MAKES SENSE TO PICK UP HERE...

...ON A QUIET BEACH PAST THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF GOA, AT THE END OF A SUMMER FULL OF LIFE AND REVELRY.

THE CROWDS HAD THINNED ON THE SHORES AT PALOLEM.

THE BIG STAGE AT THE NORTH END OF THE BEACH WAS BEING DISMANTLED...

...AND THE YOUNGEST OF THE RODRIGUEZ CHILDREN, GILLY, HAD FOUND A MIRACLE CAUGHT UNDER A PILE OF SCAFFOLDING.

WHO KNOWS HOW LONG THE POOR THING HAD BEEN UNDER THERE...

...BUT WHEN THE GIRL FOUND HIM, THE LITTLE MUTT WAS THINNED TO NOTHING AND THERE WAS BARELY ANY BREATH LEFT IN ITS LUNGS.

THE GROWNUPS ALL TOLD HER IT WAS NO USE. A PUP THAT SMALL? THIS FRAIL? WITH A BROKEN PAW?

SURELY IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME. THE LITTLE THING WAS GOING TO DIE.

BUT GILLY WAS NOT ONE TO BE DETERRED. AFFLICTED WITH A CHILD'S CAPACITY FOR TIRELESS HOPE, SHE WALKED FOR A GOOD SIX MILES TO STAND AT THE ONE PLACE WHERE SHE KNEW SHE WOULDN'T BE TURNED AWAY.

THE OLD HOUSE UP BY ST. THOMAS WHERE THEY SAID A CRAZY OLD MAN LIVED.

A DRUG-ADDLED, DRINK-MADDENED HIEROPHANT WHO TOOK IN ALL MANNER OF HOPELESS CASES AND SOMEHOW FOUND A WAY TO KEEP THEM ALIVE.

KNOCK KNOCK

=SIGH= FINE, COME ON IN.

PUT HIM DOWN ON THE TABLE BY THE COUCH.

AND DON'T TOUCH ANYTHING.

THEY SAY HIS HOUSE WAS FILLED WITH ALL MANNER OF MANGLED AND MADDENED LITTLE CREATURES.

BUT LIFE IS WORTHY AND BEAUTIFUL EVEN IF IT IS NOT ALWAYS PRETTY.

MEANWHILE, LAILA STARR, THE GIRL WHO WAS ONCE DEATH, HAD FLOWN TO THE CITY OF PANJIM.

AND GIVEN HER LUCK IN SUCH MATTERS, SHE WAS SURPRISED, EVEN A LITTLE RELIEVED, FOR HAVING SURVIVED AIR TRAVEL.

DABOLIM AIRPORT

WHILE CALMING HER NERVES IN THE LITTLE BOOKSHOP AT THE AIRPORT, SHE HAD BOUGHT HERSELF A POCKETBOOK OF POEMS.

sometimes i speak
with words i hope you hear
and yet you extol
all my unspoken mysteries.
sometimes i wonder.

listening - akur puri

IN TRUTH, SHE HAD MADE THIS PURCHASE IN HOPES OF FINDING SOMETHING IN THERE THAT MIGHT HELP HER BEGIN HER CONVERSATION WITH THE MAN SHE HAD COME HERE TO SEE.

I'M SORRY YOUR WIFE DIED, DARIUS...

UGH...NO, NO, NO. START WITH A POSITIVE.

WELL, YOU SEE, DARIUS, I DECIDED NOT TO KILL YOU WHEN YOU WERE A BABY!

KREEEEEEEEK

COME ON, LADY! WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING!

YOU WANT TO GET RUN OVER OR SOMETHING?

AS LAILA STARR BOARDED THE TAXI TO TAKE HER THREE-HOUR RIDE TO PALOLEM, SHE REALIZED THERE WERE MANY THINGS SHE DID NOT YET KNOW.

SHE DID NOT KNOW WHAT SHE WAS GOING TO SAY TO DARIUS AFTER THE WAY THEY LEFT THINGS TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS AGO.

SHE DID NOT KNOW WHAT SHE COULD OFFER TO CONVINCE HIM THAT IMMORTALITY FOR A WORLD OF MORTALS WAS A BAD IDEA.

BUT MOST OF ALL, SHE DID NOT KNOW WHAT SHE THOUGHT TO GAIN FROM ALL OF THIS.

FOR TIME, A MORTAL CONSTRUCT, HAD CHANGED HER IN WAYS SHE HAD NOT EXPECTED.

SHE NO LONGER CARED MUCH TO HAVE HER JOB BACK. SHE DIDN'T EVEN THINK OF THE GODS FOR THE MOST PART.

AND HAVING ALREADY DIED SIX TIMES, SHE FEARED HERSELF EVEN LESS.

COUNTLESS DEATHS, GHOSTS, HOSPITALS, PARTIES, FIRES, CIGARETTES, SEX, BROKEN TEMPLES, AND ARGUMENTS LATER, LAILA STARR HAD NO IDEA WHY SHE WAS ON HER WAY TO MEET DARIUS ONCE AGAIN.

SCISSORS!

THERE! ALL DONE!

NOW IT IS BETWEEN HIM AND HER. I HAVE DONE ALL THAT I CAN.

AND YOU? NOW IT IS TIME FOR YOU TO GO HOME, CHILD.

BUT...

NOPE.

I COULD...

UH-UH-UH...YOU KNOW THE DEAL.

YOU BRING THEM TO ME BROKEN AND HOPELESS. I TAKE THEM IN NO MATTER HOW LOST THE CAUSE.

BUT I ONLY TAKE IN ANIMALS, MY DEAR.

I PROMISE YOU CAN COME BACK TO CHECK ON HIM LATER, O...

...KAY?

...GOODBYE, MR. SHAH.

HELLO, DARIUS...

COME IN...IT'S GETTING DARK OUTSIDE.

I WAS UNKIND TO YOU THE LAST TIME WE MET.

IT'S...IT'S OKAY.

I UNDER-STAND. YOU WERE UPSET.

I LOOKED FOR YOU, YOU KNOW?

"IN THE WEEKS, MONTHS, MAYBE EVEN YEARS AFTER WE SPOKE.

"OF COURSE, I HAD NO IDEA WHERE TO BEGIN. SO I WENT TO MY OLD CHILDHOOD HOME...

"...THEN THE BEACH AT WALKESHWAR...

"...AND THE FLAT THAT BURNED OUT IN PAREL."

=SIGH= I...I SUPPOSE I FELT BAD. MAYBE I WANTED TO APOLOGIZE. MAYBE I WAS STILL ANGRY...I DON'T KNOW.

BUT I REGRETTED IT, THE WAY I TREATED YOU... FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH.

I WAS JUST TRYING TO TALK TO YOU, DARIUS. MAYBE ASK YOU TO RECONSIDER.

"YOU WOULD INVENT IMMORTALITY AND I WAS TO BE MADE OBSOLETE.

"WHEN I WAS FIRED AND SENT DOWN HERE, I'LL ADMIT, MY FIRST THOUGHT WAS TO TRY AND STOP YOU.

"I TRIED TO KILL YOU WHEN YOU WERE A BABY. I MEAN...I THOUGHT ABOUT IT, BUT I COULDN'T."

BUAHAHAHAH.

IS *THAT* WHY YOU'RE HERE?

HAHAHAHA... COME...COME HERE.

DO YOU SEE, LAILA STARR? WHEN THIS LITTLE THING WAS BROUGHT TO MY DOORSTEP, HE WAS ALMOST DEAD.

I DOUBT I CAN SAVE THE LEG. BUT LOOK...LOOK AT THAT CHEST HEAVING FOR BREATH. LOOK AT THE PULSING VEIN ON HIS NECK.

I WAGER HE'LL LIVE, COME MORNING.

"THIS IS WHAT I HAVE LEARNED IN ALL MY YEARS, LAILA STARR.

"WE ARE STRONG, ALL MORTAL THINGS. WE LIVE BECAUSE WE TRULY DESIRE TO. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

"EACH HEARTBEAT, EVERY BREATH--IS A REJECTION OF DEATH."

I ALREADY DID IT, YOU SEE?

"I INVENTED IMMORTALITY THREE WEEKS AFTER MY FORTY-NINTH BIRTHDAY.

"I REMEMBER, IT WAS SUMMER--AN UNUSUALLY PLEASANT THURSDAY AFTERNOON.

"THAT NIGHT I WENT OUT AND AT FIRST I THOUGHT OF CELEBRATING. I WANTED TO CALL EVERYONE AND TELL THEM I HAD SOLVED DEATH.

"BUT I DIDN'T. INSTEAD I DID THINGS I HADN'T DONE IN YEARS. ATE COTTON CANDY AT A FAIR.

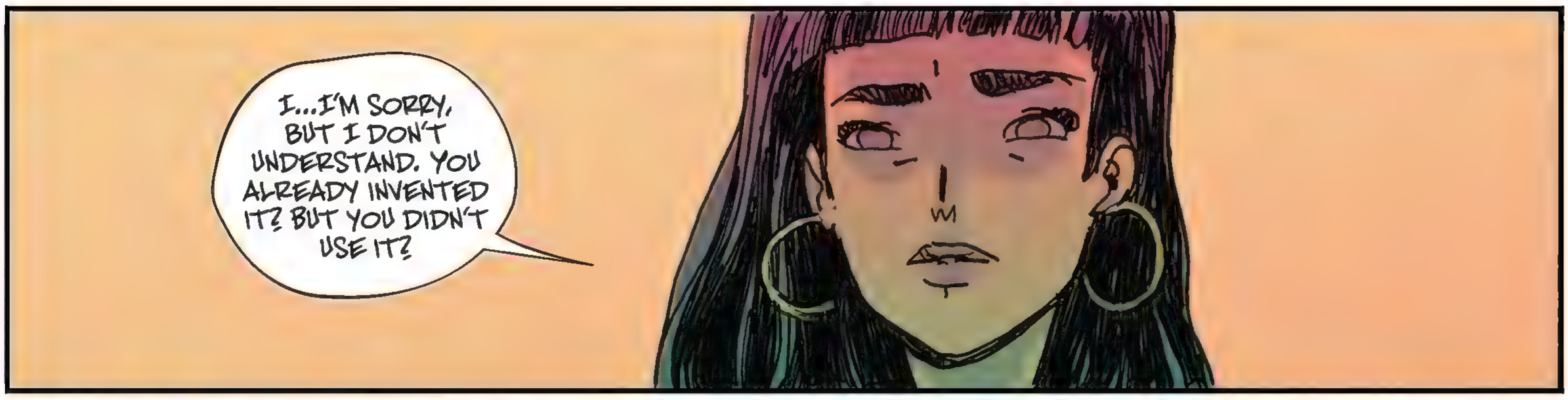
"SAW A FILM JUST BY MYSELF.

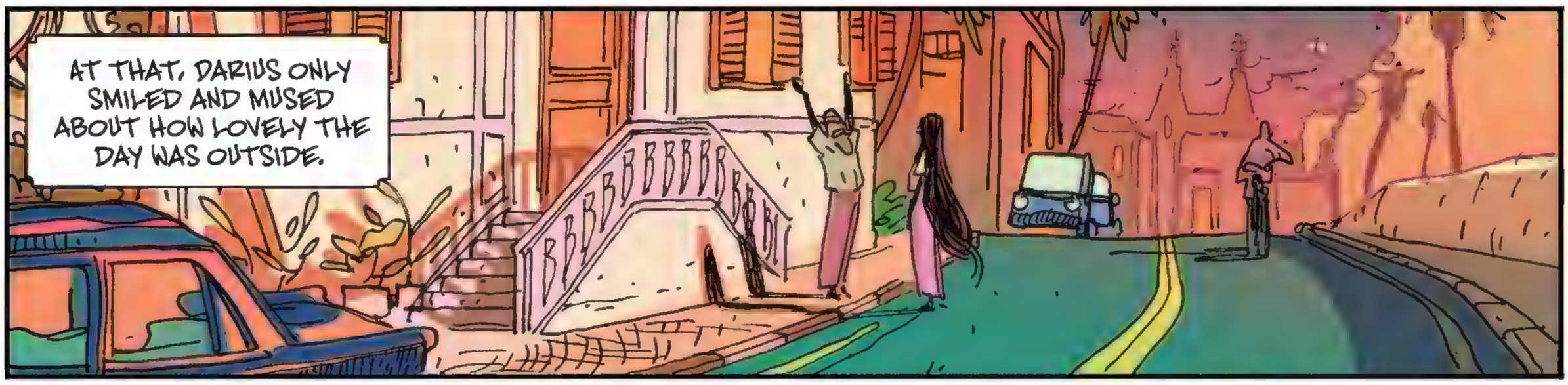
"GAVE MY LEFTOVER POPCORN TO A HOMELESS MAN OUTSIDE THE CINEMA AND WALKED HOME AT SOME UNEARTHLY HOUR.

"WHEN I CAME BACK, IT WAS STILL THERE ON MY DESK--THE SECRET TO UNENDING LIFE.

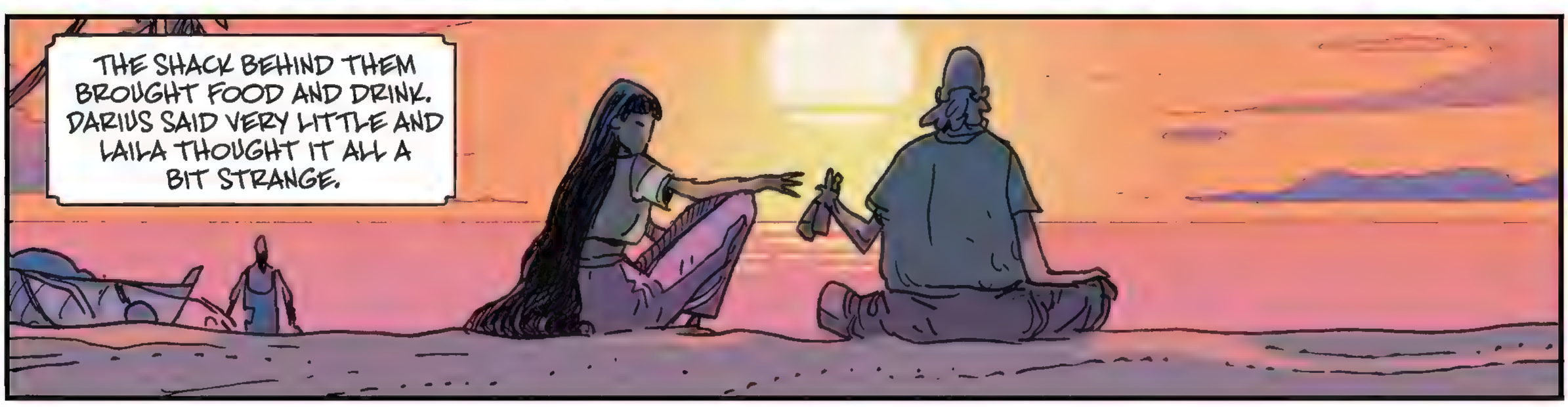
"I PICKED IT UP AND PUT IT IN AN OLD SHOEBOX.

"IT'S BEEN SITTING ON THE TOP SHELF IN MY CLOSET EVER SINCE."



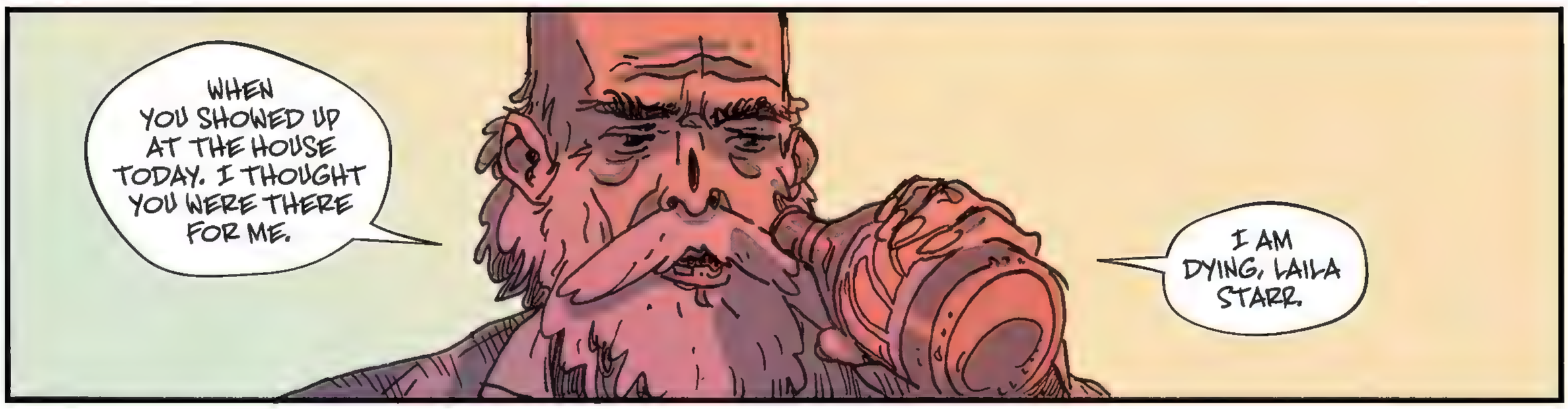


HE INSISTED THEY SIT OUT ON THE SAND BY THE SHACKS AT THE BEACH.
THEY COUNTED THE SUN-BEATEN BOATS AND CARAMEL MEN WALKING NETS FULL OF FISH ONTO THE SHORE.



i whispered to the sea
what lies beyond the edge?
in gentle waves she said to me
love and mistakes and heartbreak and victories.
i thought i had put all that behind me.

shores - akur puri



TWO YEARS AGO THE DOCTORS FOUND A TUMOR IN MY BRAIN.

IT WAS TOO FAR GONE TO OPERATE. SO THEY GAVE ME SIX TO TEN MONTHS INSTEAD.

I'M ON MONTH FOURTEEN.

"AFTER MENAKA WAS GONE, I WAS SO ANGRY AT YOU--AT DEATH. YOU HAD TAKEN EVERYONE I HAD HELD DEAR.

"I PUT ALL OF MYSELF INTO FINDING A WAY TO STOP YOU.

"AND PERHAPS ALONG THE WAY I FORGOT THERE WERE OTHERS WHO NEEDED ME, TOO."

"WHEN MY SON NEEL NEEDED ME THE MOST, I WAS AWAY FIGHTING BATTLES AGAINST MY OWN GRIEF.

DINNER

"WE NEVER RECOVERED FROM THAT. I HAVEN'T SPOKEN TO MY SON IN YEARS."

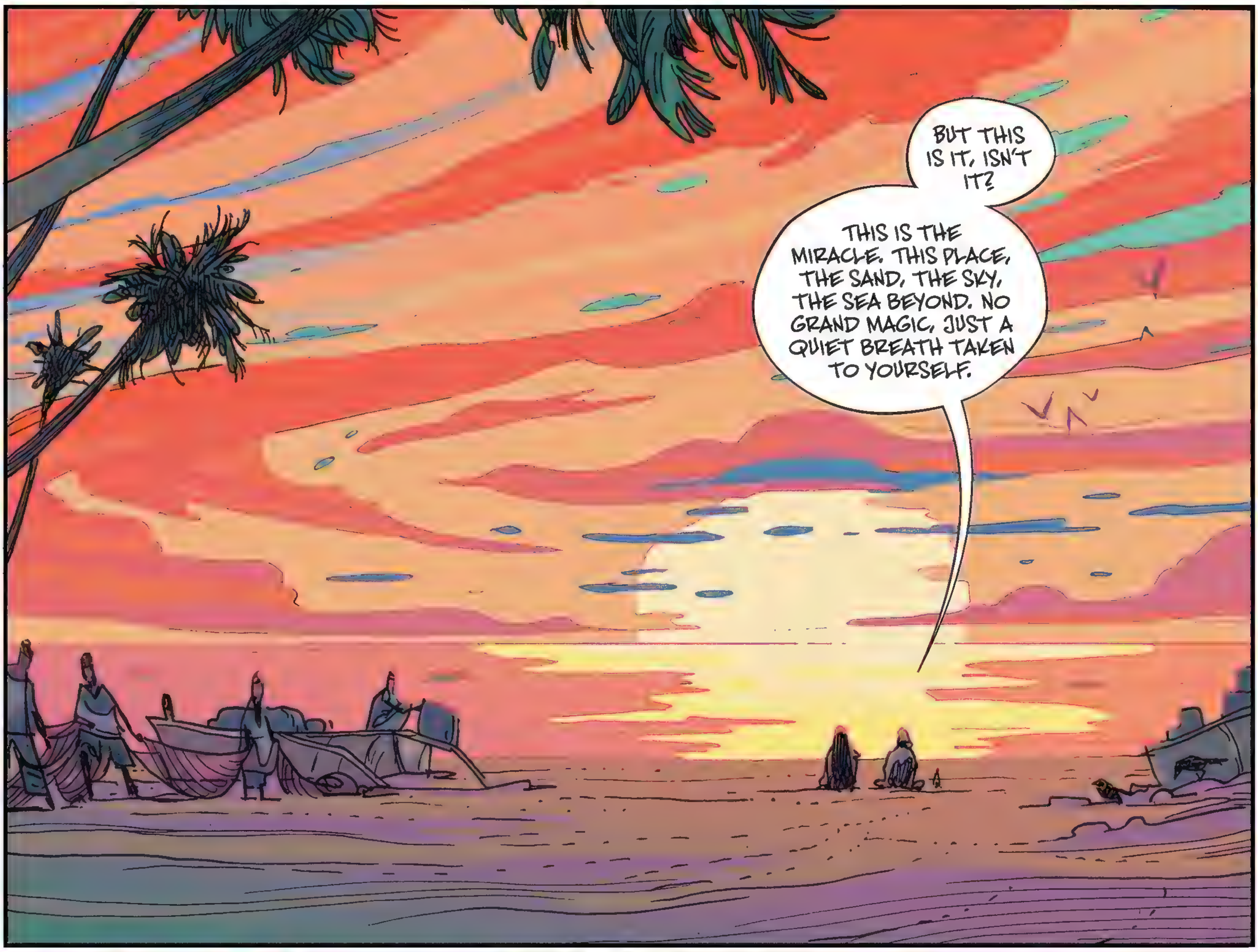
I'M SORRY...

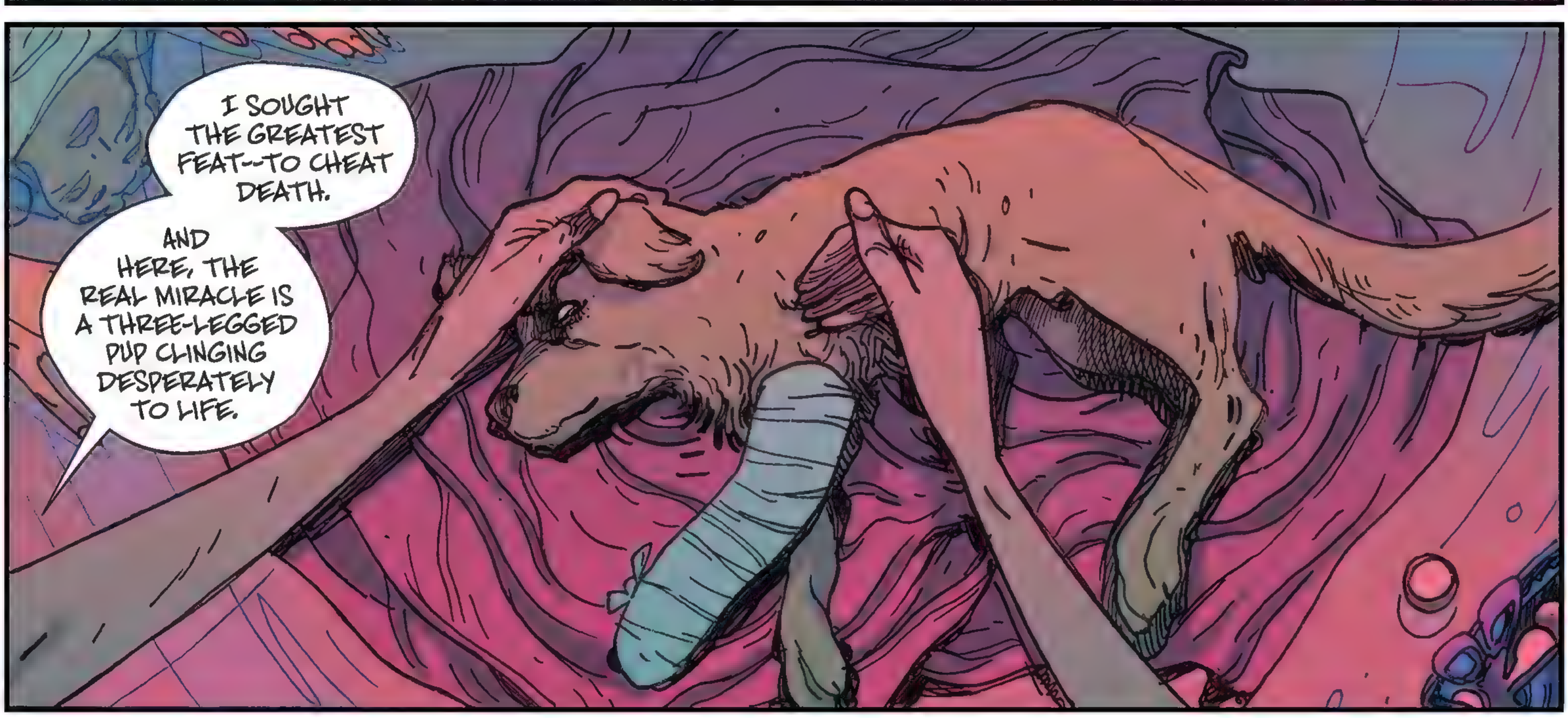
NO, NO... THAT'S JUST IT, YOU SEE? WE ALL LIVE THESE FLAWED, IMPERFECT LIVES.

YOU ARE NOT TO BLAME. I MADE MY OWN WAY HERE. AND NOW, BEFORE I GO, ALL I WANT IS TO SEE NEEL AND TELL HIM I WISH I COULD'VE BEEN BETTER.

"HERE AT THE END, I FINALLY SEE HOW BEAUTIFUL IT ALL IS.

"I REALIZE I SPENT MY WHOLE LIFE CHASING A MIRACLE."


BUT THIS IS IT, ISN'T IT?
THIS IS THE MIRACLE. THIS PLACE, THE SAND, THE SKY, THE SEA BEYOND. NO GRAND MAGIC, JUST A QUIET BREATH TAKEN TO YOURSELF.



i want to arrive at the end
with scars to show
for rash decisions made
by a careless heart

scars - akur puri

SHE MET HIM NEAR DAILY AFTER THAT. HE DID NOT ASK HER TO STAY. SHE DID NOT THINK TO GO AWAY.

THEY TOOK IN ALL MANNER OF LOST CAUSES. BROKEN, HOPELESS CREATURES. THEY SAVED SOME. THEY LOST OTHERS.

WHEN DARIUS BECAME ILL, SHE HELD HIS HAND AND SAW THAT IT WAS JUST AS FRAIL AND UNSURE AND HOPEFUL AS WHEN HE HAD BEEN A BABY.

WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR THAT DARIUS WAS NOT LONG FOR THIS WORLD, SHE PLEADED WITH HIM. SHE CRIED AND SAID...

PLEASE, DARIUS, PLEASE...JUST THIS ONCE. YOU COULD USE YOUR OWN INVENTION AND SAVE YOURSELF.

BUT HE REFUSED.

THAT NIGHT SHE HEARD HIM MAKE A CALL.

NEEL, IT'S ME...YOUR FATHER. YEAH...EVERYTHING IS OKAY...

I...I WAS WONDERING IF YOU COULD COME VISIT FOR A WHILE?

I HAVE TO TELL YOU SOMETHING...

A FEW DAYS ON, WHEN NEEL CAME TO SEE HIS FATHER, SHE WONDERED IF HE MIGHT RECOGNIZE HER.

BUT THEY WERE JUST STRANGERS NEGOTIATING THEIR AWKWARD WAYS AROUND THE MAN THEY BOTH KNEW.

SHE THOUGHT IT BEST TO LEAVE, THEN. AND JUST AS SHE HAD STRUGGLED WITH HER WORDS ON ARRIVAL, SHE FOUND HERSELF AT A LOSS FOR GOODBYES.

BRIEFLY, DARIUS CAUGHT SIGHT OF HER AND SAID...

THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING, LAILA. IF YOU DON'T MIND, COULD YOU CLEAR OUT THE SHOEBOX FROM MY CLOSET?

"IT IS YOURS TO DO WITH, AS YOU PLEASE."

Vata

I'D BE CAREFUL WITH THE WATER. YOU REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED THE LAST TIME YOU WENT FOR A SWIM, RIGHT?

HE'S DYING, PRAN. AND THERE IS NOTHING I CAN DO TO STOP IT.

I KNOW.

I'M SORRY.

WHO IS TO SAY EXACTLY HOW THINGS END? IF THERE IS ONE THING WE HAVE LEARNED, IT IS THAT LIFE'S ENDINGS ARE BEREFT OF ANSWERS.

WAS DARIUS SHAH TRULY VISITED BY DEATH IN HIS LAST DAYS?

DID THAT MEAN LAILA STARR HAD HER JOB BACK?

OR DID LIFE RESIGN ITSELF TO DEATH, AND DID LAILA AND PRANAH SET OUT TO NEW BEGINNINGS ON A BEACH SOMEWHERE IN GOA?

PERHAPS SUCH THINGS ARE BETTER LEFT IN CLOSED BOXES AND SET ADRIFT OUT INTO THE SEA.

PERHAPS IT IS ENOUGH TO REMEMBER AT STORY'S END THE MIRACLE THAT IT WAS SIMPLY TO HAVE LIVED.

AFTERWORDS

I was thirteen when I knew I wanted to be a writer. I had just finished reading The Lord of The Rings and immediately sat down to write my own vast, sprawling fantasy trilogy. I got as far as about forty thousand words, which I look back now and realize is quite the effort for a scatter-brained thirteen-year-old.

At sixteen I was in college studying the sciences out in one of Mumbai's sleepy suburbs. I wore black, kept a surly, brooding demeanor, maintained a small circle of friendships, read a lot, wrote poetry and wanted to write about death. It was this last endeavor where I stumbled. What did I know about death? It had always been this distant, heavy concept that seemed so intangible and nebulous that all that I was equipped to say of it was cliché and tropes.

My very Indian parents had tried their best to keep me shielded from all manner of mortality and morbidity as a child, and here I was, now a young man engrossed in his own illusory immortality. I suppose I wasn't the only teenager to think himself indestructible.

At twenty, I found myself in Philadelphia studying to be an engineer and I had only just rediscovered my love of comics. I had read Neil Gaiman's iconic take on Death personified and had discovered Daytripper, the first of my many readings of Fábio Moon and Gabriel Bá. I had that yearning that I had felt as a thirteen-year-old, again. I wanted to write. To tell stories, but what did I have to say that Gaiman, Moon, and Bá hadn't already said on the matter?

But it was here that something turned and changed for me. I looked back at my own memories of childhood and realized that she had always been there, nearby. In whispers, accidents and closed rooms. I remember hearing of the passing of a woman who had been my nanny. She had fallen on terrible times and endured a difficult life before her death. I remember my sister's friend passing away after a road accident on his bike. I remember watching my cousin's uncle weeping as he held his mother in his hands, singing to her even as she grew tired of taking breaths.

Death had always been there nearby, and I had been too much of an immortal to notice. It was this feeling that I drew upon at thirty-seven, sat in a bar at San Diego talking to Eric Harburn, who commissioned and edited this book with the gentle and reassuring touch of a brilliant editor.

This was in 2019, before the world changed.

I was thirty-nine when the first issues of The Many Deaths of Laila Starr began coming out. Working with Filipe on this book had been such a joy. We spent long hours on the phone talking about India, about Saramago, life and death. None of it directly connected to the story and yet all of it is in the book.

So many readers reached out to say how they had found the story a comfort through the difficult years of loss and sorrow.

I still ask myself if I had anything valuable to say through the story. I still wonder if it all doesn't descend into the same simplistic ways in which we view our own lives and mortality. But at forty, I now realize with some amusement that all complexity we weave into our lives is an attempt at some manner of immortality. Beginnings and endings are powerfully simple things. Sixteen-year-old me had more wisdom than I gave him credit for.

He knew then as I do now that it's the messy middle where all stories lie. I just hadn't lived enough of it.

Ram V
London, 2022

This is one of those special projects that hit me with perfect timing.

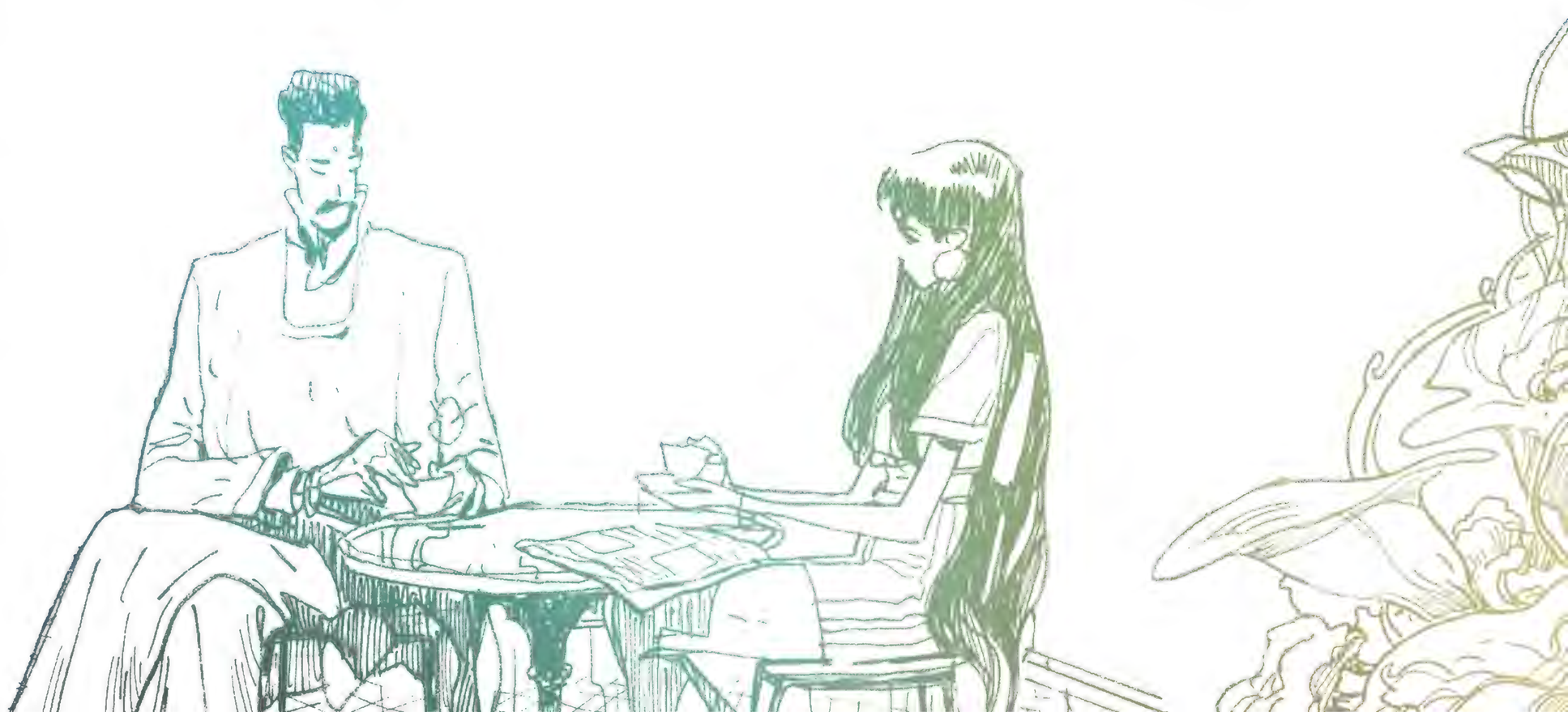
Since the first script, the first chat with Ram V and Eric Harburn from BOOM!, I knew we had all the ingredients to make a great book.

I have worked on it through the first waves of the COVID pandemic and its several lockdowns, but the story and Ram's beautiful writing made a huge impact and were at the same time a big inspiration for me.

Coloring a work of mine for this long and for the first time was a challenge. For that, I was visiting old pictures from my trip to India years back, taking long walks in parks and empty streets, and driving my bicycle along the Lisbon riverbank. It was pure joy. Searching for inspiration became a daily routine for me. It helped me, also, to keep the focus on what is important in life and all the beautiful things we are surrounded by, like a long meditation.

The hard work I have put into it and the context were not easy to balance with my private life but in the end, it was a true pleasure and helped me to be not only a better artist but also a better human being.

Filipe Andrade
Lisbon, 2022



WHAT NOTES TO PLAY

Originally published in PanelxPanel No. 47, June 2021.

RAM V ON BREAKING STORY

I have a process, but it varies wildly. I don't know that I have any one way of breaking a story, to be honest. Sometimes ideas come to you fully formed. Other times it's just a scene or a character that you begin with. In the case of *Laila Starr* it was the high concept. "*Death gets fired*" and the structure of "*she dies many times before she understands what it is to be human*"—those two came to me first.

When I started talking to Eric Harburn at BOOM!, we discussed wanting to do something in the vein of *Grafity's Wall*, and from there it just clicked. Once I had the concept and structural requirements, it was a matter of coming up with individual stories for the issues.

You'll see what I mean by this as you read more of the issues. They work independently but there is also a bigger point to it all. Those, I haven't outlined at all. I made them up as I wrote each issue. So, in that sense, this has been a bit more free-form. I really enjoy the improvisational aspect of it. It was something I experienced with *Blue in Green* and I've been leaning toward more free-form story breaking since then.

I suppose it is also a matter of time and experience making these things. A lot of these stories also come from lived experience, so I suppose that makes it a lot easier!

WRITING FOR ARTISTS

Having a sense of what the visual tone and aesthetic of this story is is very important as a writer in comics, to be honest. I'd like to think that I have a strong sense of what a story needs to feel like visually. That doesn't mean I have rigid ideas for visuals that I then impose on an artist; rather I have an idea of what type of art "fits."

So, it is less a case of my matching style and tone to an artist and more a case of finding an artist who is right for the story. In this case, the moment I saw Filipe's work, I was in love. I remember telling Eric, "This is the guy. We need to get Filipe for the book." There is an innocence and a playfulness to his linework and to the exaggeration of his characters that I think is perfect for the book.

Then, once we had begun to work on the story, there was of course a measure of adjusting and tweaking stylistic choices to fit each other. I noticed with Issue #1 that Filipe was leaning into the wide-panel storytelling format, and so I went ahead and wrote the rest of the issues to fit that. I think it lends an easy-going pace to the whole thing and brings a lot of momentum to the story. So I lean into those things with the script!

I script tight in that I know what is in the shot and I generally have a sense of how that shot looks in my head. I try to put that down in a script. However, my concern with a script is to be less prescriptive in terms of actual logistics of what's in a panel and more to do with the emotional content of what I'm trying to do with it. Sometimes that is evident, other times it needs spelling out.

Then there is also a matter of familiarity. Once you understand the cues and direction that an artist gleans from the script, it becomes that much easier to script for that artist. I'd like to think I know how Filipe thinks when it comes to making choices based on what's there in the script. Once I know that, the script becomes that much more streamlined to aid that process.

THINKING VISUALLY WHEN WRITING

I think about how the page will layout to an extent. I only do this where there is something specific to be achieved from laying out a page in a certain way. In such cases, I'll usually sketch it out for myself and then drop in a note on layouts when I script. Sometimes I'll even pass on the sketch or a layout.

But largely, I don't find that being very specific about page layouts and breakdowns helps outside of those specific moments. Filipe has a natural flow and thought process to his art, and it's like being part of a band. You want to tell your guitarist sometimes that it might help to drop in a lick or a solo or come in a little early. You might even hum a tune out to help, but you don't want to be spelling out what notes to play and when. In my experience that never leads to anything cool.

I think collaborating with an artist on a comic is a lot like that. You want them to get what you're doing with the song. You don't want to tell them what notes to play.

FILIPE ANDRADE ON ARTISTIC METHOD

After all these years working in comics, I have developed my method for it that consists of four steps.

First, I print and read the script, which allows me to dive into the book. Second, I break down the script to understand the number of panels per page, how much dialogue, etc., and add my notes, reference and everything else. Third, I work on the actual layouts on my iPad. Fourth, the next day I cross-reference all notes with layouts for any changes before sending it to editors. However, my layouts are a bit sketchy and always a bit open to any upgrade, especially to balancing scenes.

I make comics like I'm directing and thinking about the story being told cinematically. These wide panels allow me to respect that vision. Also, working with a grid helps me to set the time and pace of the book in a much more natural way to me as a creator and to readers, too (I hope). This way, the art flows along the action and lettering, all working at the same time, I feel.

I like to keep the structure of the comic simple and straightforward. The kind of "camera" I use for the panels allows the story and its characters to shine like it's supposed to, and keep the focus on that.

Sometimes I do break this for the design of the page, but I always tend to simplify the structure. For example, the shots of the legs on the penultimate page of Issue #1 were important to ground Laila to the world, and show unconscious emotions throughout the hands and legs.

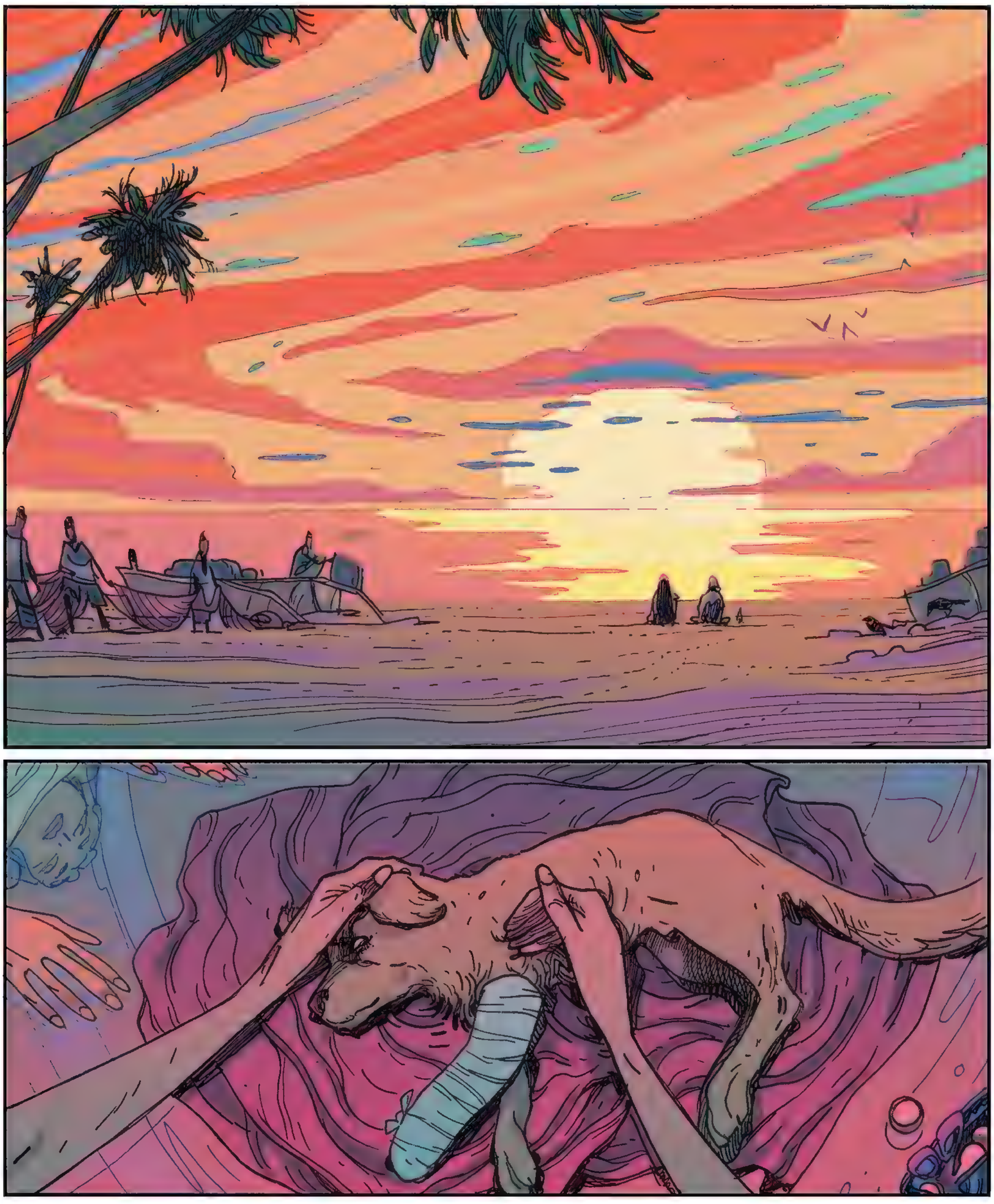
BRINGING CHARACTERS TO LIFE

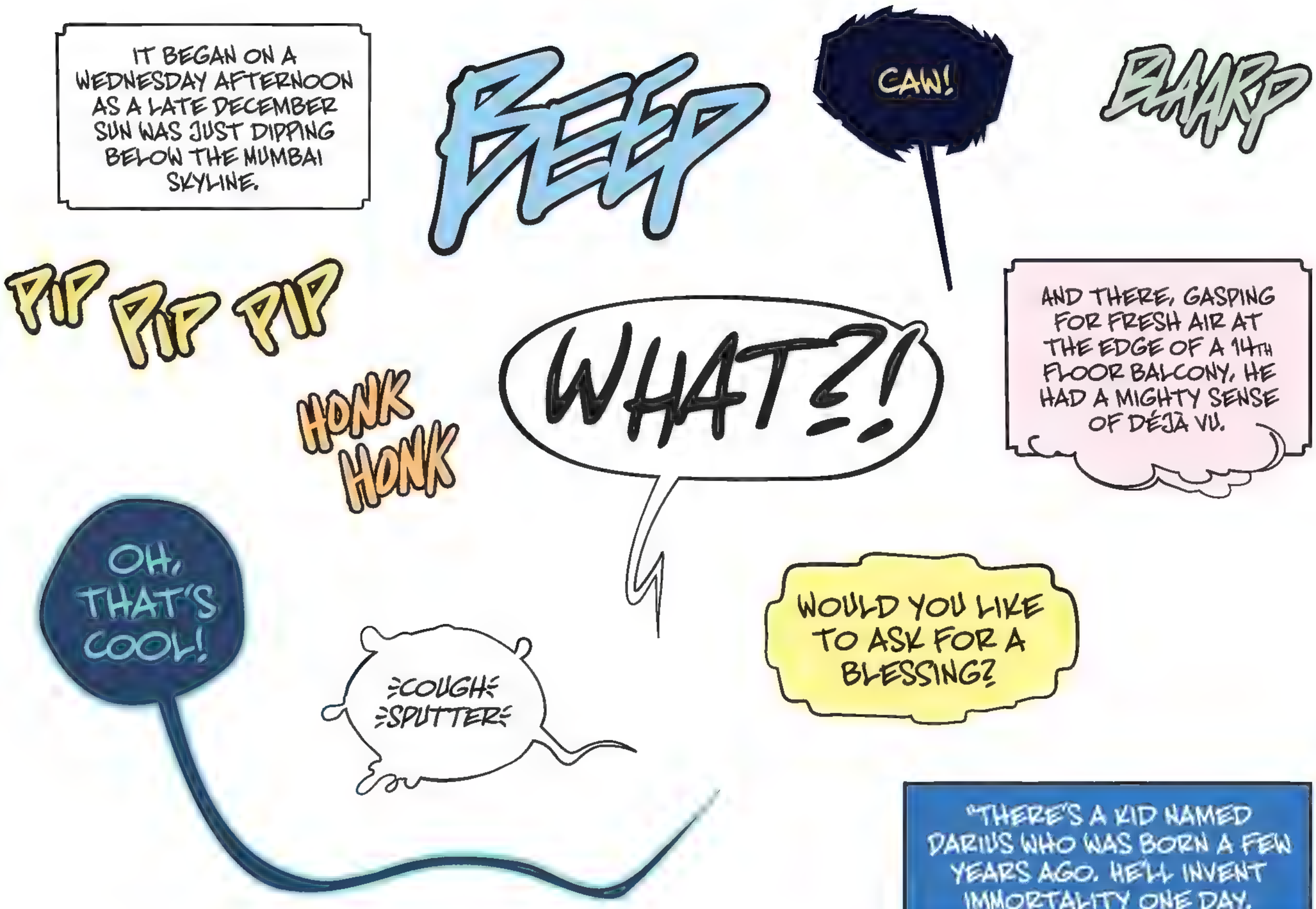
Since I was a kid, I always admired the gymnastics of motion. I would always look up the best sports for it such as solo gymnastics, swimming, jumps, etc. I have also practiced some of these sports, and I have been surfing for a long period of my life, too. This sense of movement is naturally within me, so when I draw I tend to make everything alive. Ram writes in a beautiful and poetic way, so it easily pulls this energy for me, too.

COLORING THE WORLD

I have lived in Asia for a while and visited many places in that beautiful continent. One of those was India, and I had actually been in Mumbai ten years ago. The range of colors in that region of our planet are incredible and so strong that they are overwhelming. I wanted to keep that, but tone that down a bit so the book would respect, visually, the tone of the story. Also, the soft pastel tones have this sense of magic and eternity which fits the book. These colors are shown naturally in the first and last lights of the day, and as I was riding my bicycle along the Tagus River in Lisbon to go and to come back from the studio, sometimes in early lights and sunsets, these visions were a huge influence on my color direction.

I also work with a structure on each comic when it comes to coloring, too. Inês Amaro has been doing the flat colors, so it is a huge help to keep my vision and ideas for the different sequences. Sometimes I can break down that color structure to enlighten some specific scenes, but the most important thing is the book as a whole. Also, this is teamwork, and editors play an important role here, so it's the book that shines in the end.




IT BEGAN ON A WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON AS A LATE DECEMBER SUN WAS JUST DIPPING BELOW THE MUMBAI SKYLINE.
BEEP
CAW!
BLAARP
PIP PIP PIP
HONK HONK
WHAT?!
AND THERE, GASPING FOR FRESH AIR AT THE EDGE OF A 14TH FLOOR BALCONY, HE HAD A MIGHTY SENSE OF DÉJÀ VU.
OH, THAT'S COOL!
=COUGH= =SPUTTER=
WOULD YOU LIKE TO ASK FOR A BLESSING?
"THERE'S A KID NAMED DARIUS WHO WAS BORN A FEW YEARS AGO. HE'LL INVENT IMMORTALITY ONE DAY.

DERON BENNETT OF ANDWORLD DESIGN ON THE ESSENTIALS

The essential piece to figuring out the style of the lettering, in my opinion, is the line. I look at the artist's line work to inform my approach more than anything else. Line art is a fundamental part of the design and describes so much. I can determine things like the drawing tool used, the steadiness of the artist's hand, texture, shapes, and weight. Each artist has a unique approach, and I try to zero in on the distinct features for every book. I use that information and apply it to the lettering. Everything, including the dialogue font, balloons, captions, and sound effects, is determined by the line art.

For *Laila Starr,* I tried a few different styles and presented them to Eric, Ramiro, and Ram. I had several organic shapes and winding tail styles for the balloons. I even tried out a square-shaped balloon reminiscent of some European comics.

The font was probably the biggest hurdle. We tried a mixed-case font as well as all uppers in a few font styles. It's tough to find a digital font that appears irregular enough to imitate handwriting without being too illegible. So we were looking for a balance. We used a combination of the organic balloons that I had and less curved tails, reserving the winding ones for off-panel balloons. The font we chose was legible but still had that personality we wanted.

The caption shape was one of the things presented to me as an example before we started work. I thought it worked well, so I went with it without a second thought. I just added rules as to what edges would be round and what would be sharp. Here again, we considered using sentence-case and also italics to set it apart from the main font. I'm not a massive fan of sentence-case, and I also preferred to maintain continuity over everything else, so we stuck with the original font. I didn't want things to get too unwieldy, especially since we will explore several unique character voices.

EVERYONE ON THEIR FAVORITE SEQUENCE

Ram V: I think the whole opening chunk is probably my favorite. There is an elegance to how three disparate narratives come together. There's (1) Mr. and Mrs. Shah in traffic. There's (2) Laila at the party. And there's (3) Death getting fired.

Having them all play into each other without giving away what's going to happen, but also making it feel exciting when they do come together. That's like writing a musical intro piece. You write in layers and you lay them on top of each other and they are all distinct, they come at different times from different directions, but when they do finally collide, there is nothing quite like that feeling.

Filipe Andrade: This book had a lot of fun sequences to draw but my favorite page of Issue #1 is Page 3, when Laila first appears, because it's really well written and the pacing is beautiful.

It was challenging because this takes place in an apartment party. It could be a mess, but I like the way the camera goes from the outside and through the party to find an enigmatic character like Laila over the window, from the general to the particular. I always like these types of cinematic scenes, and since I first read it in the script, the images popped in my mind like this. In the end, this is a great symbiosis between me and Ram and one of the reasons we make a great team.

Inês Amaro: My favorite sequence to [help] color was the one on Page 4. At the time, I had no clue as to what the story of the comic book might be, since I received the pages without the dialogues, and suddenly I was coloring a door in the sky which was actually the entrance to an elevator full of strange figures. It was challenging to understand and interpret the shapes of these characters to color them correctly, but also, in this sequence we meet this incredibly strong female character which, I then found out, was the goddess of Death.

Deron Bennett (AndWorld Design): Munmun! I absolutely loved working on the hospital sequence because of Munmun. Aside from the poignant conversation, I enjoyed creating a sense of dimension with the character. She speaks with an inverted balloon, indicating that she's on the "other side." I also experimented with having their balloons show up behind the door and through the glass on Page 13. You can almost feel the wall of space. I wanted to have fun with this character and so I looked for ways to make the sequence a bit interactive. There was a point where I tried to make a balloon look like it was partway through the wall as Munmun walked through, but it wasn't reading correctly. I nixed it, but I love that *Laila* allows me to play around with the rules.

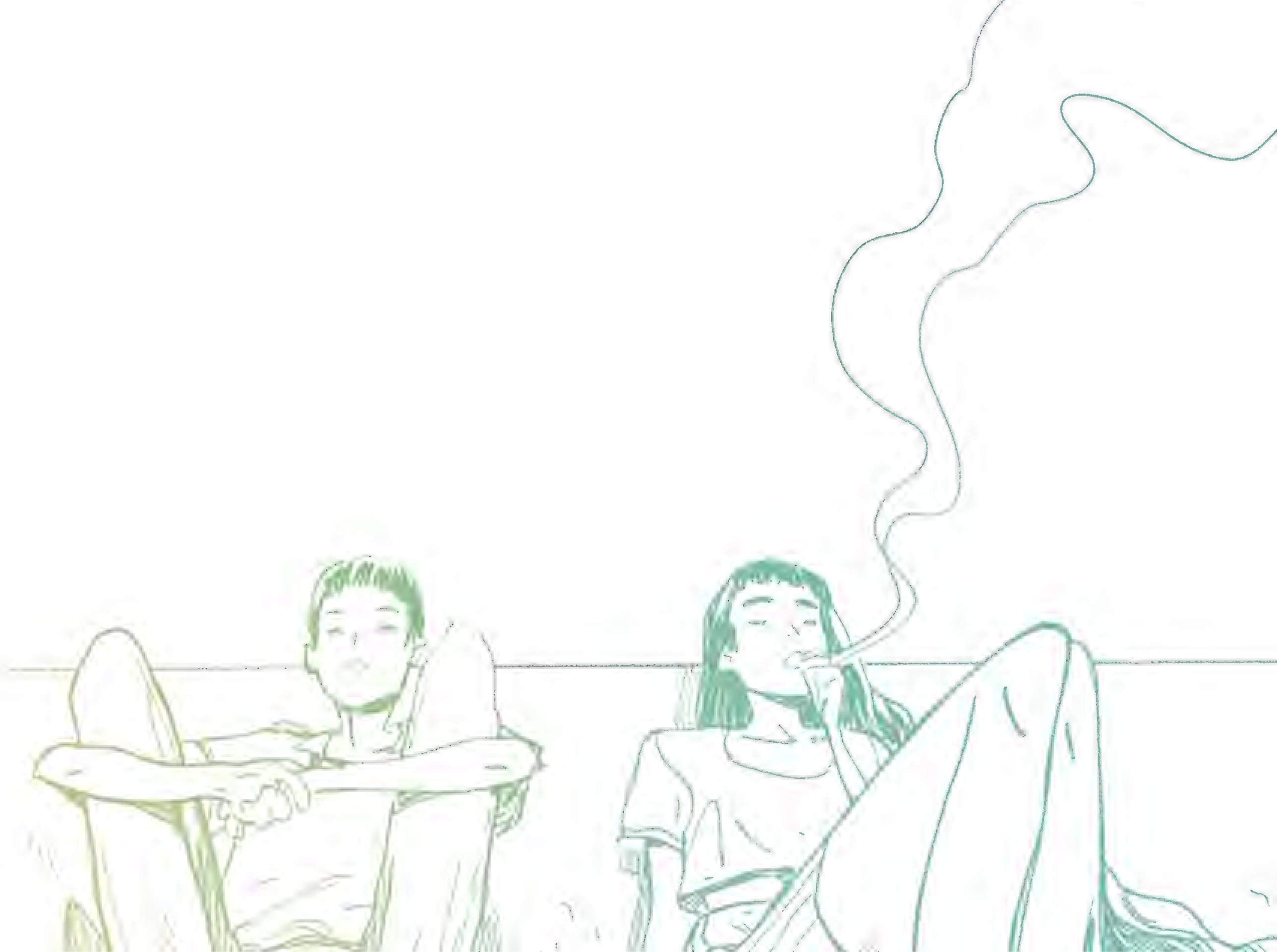
PanelxPanel is the Eisner Award-winning monthly digital magazine celebrating the comics medium. Featuring a range of critics and comics creators in each issue, looking at themes, craft, and why comics are a unique medium for storytelling. Edited by Strip Panel Naked's Hassan Otsmane-Elhaou, it can be found at gumroad.com/panelxpanel

DEVELOPMENT ARTWORK BY

FILIPE ANDRADE

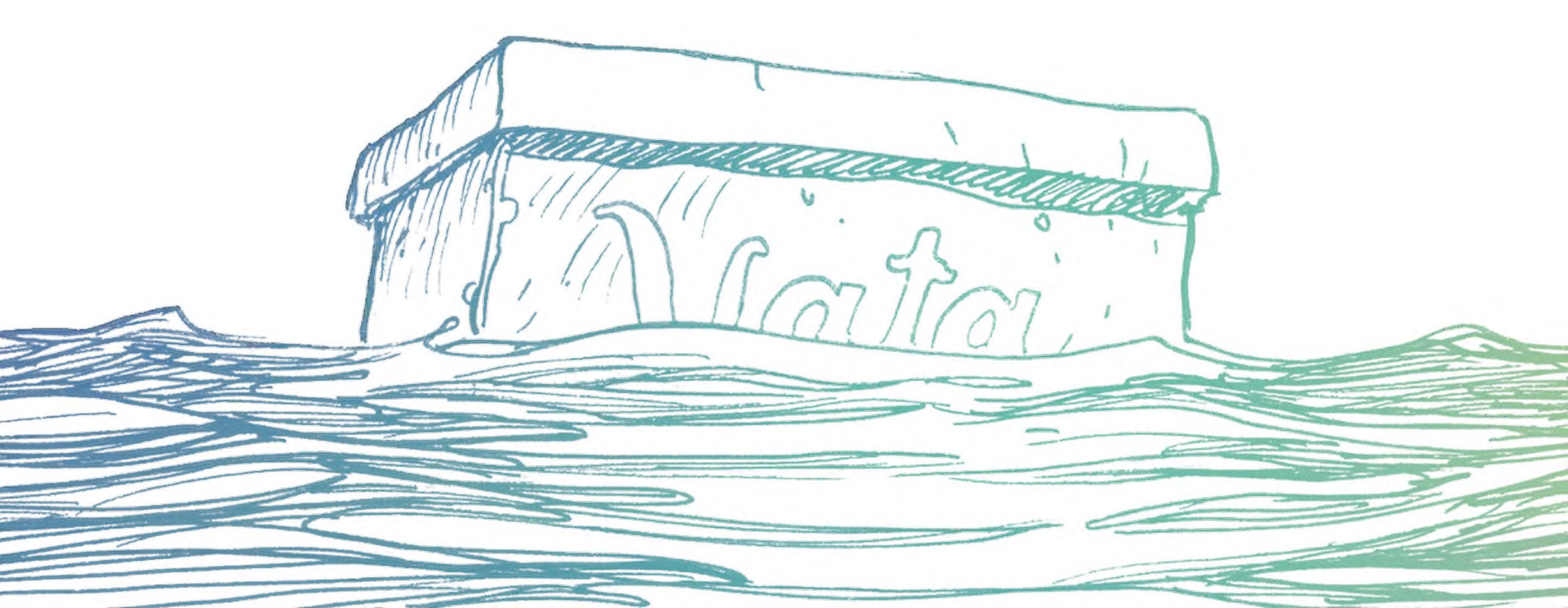
SERIES COVERS BY

FILIPE ANDRADE



Ram V is an award-winning author and creator of comics and graphic novels such as *Grafity's Wall, These Savage Shores*, and *Blue in Green*. Since publishing his first book in 2016, Ram's work has gone on to garner critical and popular success and multiple awards. Apart from creating original work, since 2018, Ram has also written for iconic characters and titles at DC Comics and Marvel Entertainment.

Filipe Andrade is an artist from Lisbon, Portugal. Andrade studied sculpture in Lisbon's fine art university. He has collaborated and published with BOOM! Studios, Marvel Comics, MTV Networks, Riot Games, Passion Animation Studios, and more. Aside from his personal work, he has also collaborated with Auéééu Theatre Company since 2014. You can find his work @filipe_andrade_artist.



SON OF ULTRON

"THIS FAN... THIS MONSTER!"